WESTERN ACTION NOVELS MAGAZINE

15¢
APR

2 Gun-Swift NOVELS

"COMING OF THE LAW"
by
CHAS. ALDEN SELTZER

"TROUBLE AT TRES PIÑOS"
by
J. ALLAN DUNN

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

ARTHUR CARTER

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No one ever noticed Bill,—until.....

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it's easy to learn this "short cut" way

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The big chance in Bill's life began at Dot Webster's party—and quite by accident, too.

As the party got under way, Bill took his usual place in the corner. But this time he had a strange grin on his face—a smile half impish, half determined. "What's Bill snickering about?" someone whispered. "There's nothing funny about a party without our prize piano player."

Dot's face flushed.

"I'm sorry, folks, but Dave Gordon, our pianist, couldn't come. Isn't there someone here who can play?"

For a moment no one answered. Then suddenly Bill rose and strode to the piano. "Do you mind if I fill in?" he said. Everyone burst out laughing. "What's Bill doing? Trying to make a fool of himself?" someone asked. But Bill pretended not to hear.

As he struck the first few chords, everyone leaned forward spellbound. For Bill was playing as Dave Gordon had never played. Playing with the fire and soul of a master musician, while everyone sat in awed silence until the last dreamy chord had died away. In a moment Bill was the center of an admiring throng. In answer to their eager questions, he told them how he had always wanted to play, but never had the time or the money to realize his ambition. And then one day he read about the wonderful U. S. School of Music course, and how anyone could learn, at home, without a teacher, in half the time, and at one third the cost, of ordinary old-fashioned methods. "That day," said Bill, was a lucky day for me. I sent for the course, and when it arrived, I was amazed! I never dreamed that learning music could be so easy. The course was as much fun as a game, and in a few short months I had mastered some of the most popular pieces. That's the whole secret. There's no mystery about it. Learning to play is actually as easy as A B C this 'Short-Cut' way."

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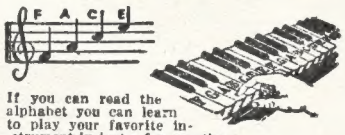

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WESTERN ACTION NOVELS MAGAZINE

Vol. III, No. 2 — *April, 1937, Issue*

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Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill. Single copy price, 15c. Yearly subscription, 75c. For advertising rates write DOUBLE ACTION GROUP, 100 Hudson St., New York, N. Y.

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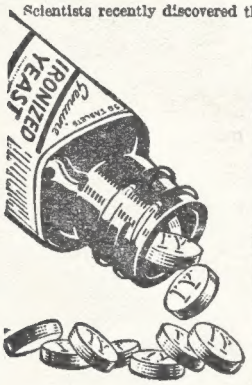

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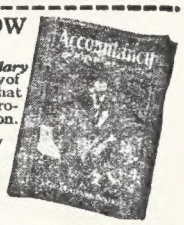

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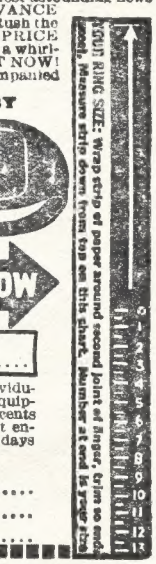

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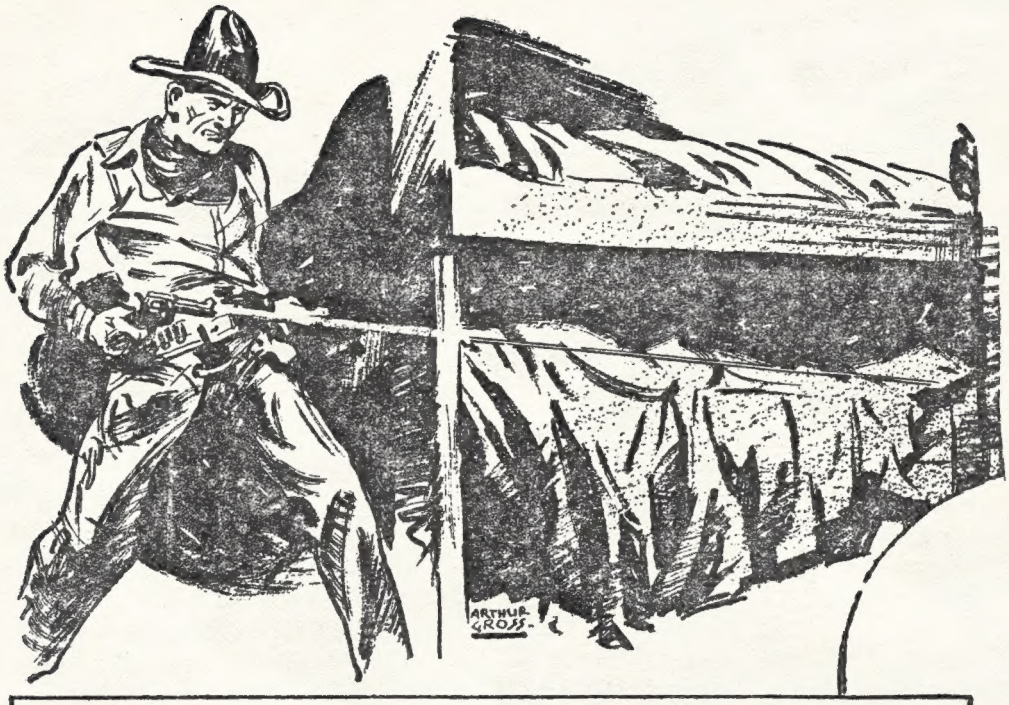


Six-guns blazed a lurid trail in the early West. Death was the by-word and guns played the part of judge, jury and executioner. There were only two lawmen respected throughout this wild and lawless frontier, Judge Colt and Judge Lynch —and into this land of sudden death and primitive passions came Kent Hollis, rancher and newspaper publisher, a man with guts enough to face death to back his stand—"The law must come to Union County—The Dry Bottom Kicker heralds the coming of the Law!"

CHAPTER I

IF the passengers on the west-bound train that pulled up at the little red wooden station at Dry Bottom at the close of a June day, were interested in the young man bearing the two suit cases, they gave no evidence of it. True, they noted his departure; with casual glances they watched him as he stepped down upon the platform; but immediately they forgot his athletic figure and his regular featured, serious face as their thoughts returned to the heat, the dust, and the monotony of travel.

The young man stood motionless for a moment, listening to the clatter of the wheels over the rail-joints, watching the smoke from the engine-stack befoul the clear blue of the sky. Then he smiled grimly, threw a rapid glance toward a group of loungers standing at a corner of the station, and walked over to where the station agent stood examining some newly arrived packages.

"Do you mind directing me to the courthouse?" said the young man.

The agent looked up, turned, and ran a measuring, speculative eye over the new arrival. He noted the Eastern cut of the young man's clothing and beneath the dust of travel the clear, healthy white skin of his face. "Stranger here?" observed the agent.

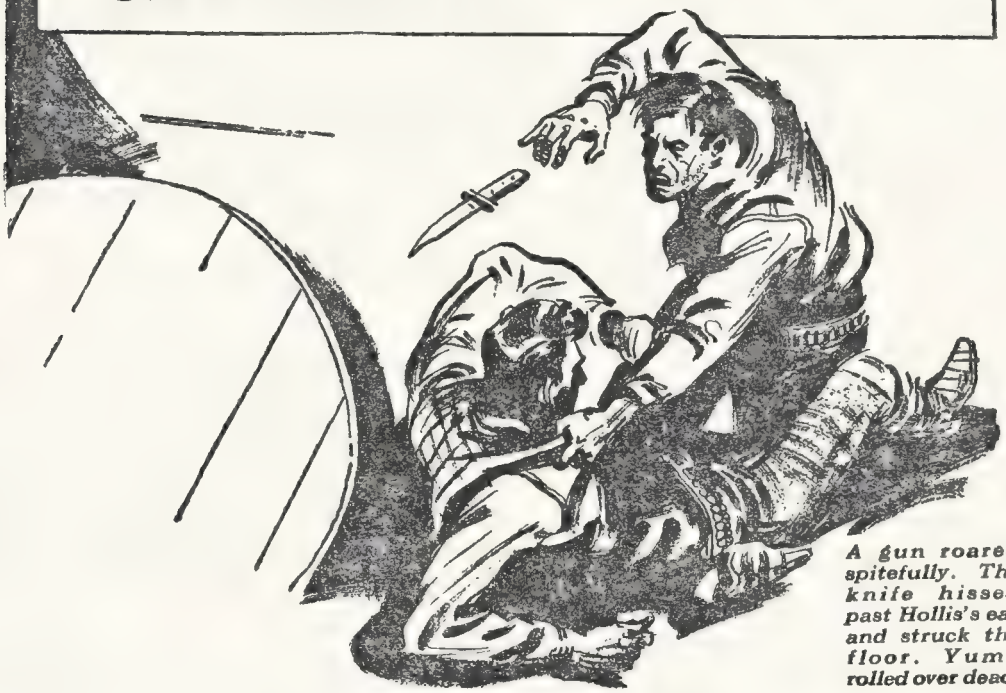
"Yes."

"No, I don't mind," resumed the agent, answering the young man's question. "You won't have any trouble findin' the courthouse. There's only one street in this town an' the courthouse is down to the other end of it—you couldn't miss it if you tried." He grinned with some amusement at the young man's back as the latter with a

COMING OF THE LAW

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF FRONTIER DAYS IN NEW MEXICO BY

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER



A gun roared spitefully. The knife hissed past Hollis's ear and struck the floor. Yuma rolled over dead.

cordial "thank you," returned to his suit cases, gripped them firmly by the handles, and strode down the wooden platform toward the street.

" 'Nother tenderfoot," remarked a lounger, "they're runnin' this country plum to hell!"

The young man strode slowly down the board sidewalk that paralleled the buildings on one side of the street, mentally taking in the dimensions of the town. It was not an inviting picture. Mostly a lot of ramshackle buildings with false fronts. There were many private dwellings, some stores, but the young man's first impression was that there was an enormous number of saloons.

He saw very few people. Some cowponies were hitched to rails in front of several of the saloons; in front of a store he observed a canvas-covered wagon which he recognized as a "prairie schooner"; in front of another store he saw a spring wagon of the "buckboard" variety. That was all. The aroma of sage-brush filled his nostrils; the fine, flint-like, powdered alkali dust lay thick everywhere. It was unattractive and dismal.

THE town, as it lay before him, began in desolation and ended in desolation. Except that it was a trifle larger it differed in no important particular from many others that littered the face of the world

through which he had passed during the last twenty-four hours. In the stifling heat of the lazy June afternoon it drowsed, seemingly deserted except for the ponies and the two wagons, and the few incurious cowboys who had rewarded the young man with their glances. Apparently whatever citizens were here were busy in the saloons.

The suit cases were heavy; he paused in front of a building and set them down, while with his handkerchief he mopped the dust and perspiration from his forehead. He saw a flaring sign on the roof of the building in front of which he had stopped and he read the legend with a smile of derision: "The Fashion Saloon." Several ponies were hitched to the rail in front of the building; the bridle of one was gaily decorated with a bow of ribbon. Only a woman would have decorated a pony thus, the young man decided with a smile. Yet what sort of woman would hitch her pony in front of a saloon? He looked about him for some explanation and saw a vacant space beside him and beside the vacant space a store. There was no hitching rail in front of the store, therefore here was the explanation. He heard a sound behind him and turning he beheld the figures of a man and a woman in the vacant space between the two buildings.

The woman seemed to be little more than a girl, for as the young man watched she turned slightly toward him, and he saw youth pictured on her face, and innocence.

It was some time before he noticed the man. The latter stood facing the girl and he could not get a view of his face. He had a gigantic frame, with huge shoulders that loomed above the girl, dwarfing her. The young man remained motionless, watching the two, for there was something in the big man's attitude that held him. The man turned presently and the young man had a glimpse of his face. It was heavy featured, coarse, and an unmistakable brutality was betrayed in it. The young man's lips curled. He did not like the type, and it was the girl's face that held him now that he had seen the man's.

The girl seemed moved with some deep emotion over something the big man had said, for her slight figure had stiffened and she stood looking at him with an angry, intense gaze. Then the young man heard the big man's voice:

"So you don't take kindly to my courting? Don't want anything to do with me?" His forced laugh had a harshness in it that caused the young man's muscles to stiffen.

"Do you think it necessary for me to tell you that—again?" the girl answered.

"You're going to have something to do with me," the man said shortly. "You're going to hook up with me or I'm putting that crazy brother of yours out of business!"

The girl was suddenly rigid and a deep red suffused her cheeks. The young man's face paled at the threat, and he leaned forward, wishing to hear some more of this extraordinary conversation. More of it came quickly. The girl spoke, her voice even and well controlled, though burdened with a biting sarcasm:

"What a filthy swine you are, to threaten to make war upon a girl and her afflicted brother. But I'm not afraid of you!"

She took a step toward him, standing very close to him and looking straight into his eyes.

THE young man crowded a little closer, though he knew that this conversation was none of his affair further than that he was interested—as any man would be interested—in seeing that the young woman received decent treatment.

The big man's face had become poisonously bloated. The girl's defiance seemed to have enraged him.

"Hell!" he said venomously. "You're talking damn brave!" He leaned closer to her. "And you think you'd be disgraced if folks knowed you was a friend of mine?" He laughed harshly. "Most folks are tickled to be known as my friends. But I'm telling you this: If I ain't a friend I'm an enemy, and you're doing as I say or I'm making things mighty unpleasant for you and your poor, 'afflicted' brother!"

The young man saw the girl's hands clench, saw her face grow slowly pale. Twice now had the big man taunted her about her brother, and plainly his words had hurt her.

"Hurts, does it?" said the big man, brutally. "Well, you've brought it on yourself, being such a damn prude!"

He reached out and grasped her by the shoulder. She shrank back, struggling with him, trying to grasp the butt of an ivory-handled revolver that swung at her right hip. The big man pinned her arms and the effort was futile.

And then retribution—like an avalanche

—struck the big man. He heard the movement, sensed the danger, and flung his right hand toward his pistol butt. There was a silent struggle; a shot, one of the young man's arms swung out — flail like — the clenched hand landing with a crash. The big man went down like a falling tree—prone to the ground, his revolver flying ten feet distant, a little blue-white smoke curling lazily upward out of its muzzle. The big man was raised again—bodily—and hurled down again. He lay face upward in the white sunlight—a mass of bruised and bleeding flesh.

The young man's anger had come and gone. He stood over the big man, looking down at him, his white teeth gleaming through his slightly parted lips.

"I think that will do for you," he said in an even, passionless voice.

For an instant there was a tense silence. The young man turned and looked at the girl, who was regarding him with surprised and bewildered eyes.

The young man smiled mirthlessly. "I think I waited rather too long. But he won't bother you again—at least for a few minutes."

He saw the girl's gaze directed to a point somewhere behind him and he turned to see that a door in the side of the Fashion Saloon was vomiting men. They came rushing out, filling the space between the two buildings. The young man stood silent while the newcomers ranged themselves about him, others giving their attention to the big man who still lay on the ground. The girl had not moved; she was standing near the young man, her face pale, her slight figure rigid. The young man looked from her to the men who had crowded about him and he became aware that one of the men—a slender, olive-skinned cowboy—evidently a half-breed—was speaking to him. He stood looking at the man, saw menace in his eyes, heard his voice, writhing in profane accusation:

"So you've shot Beeg Beel, you tenderfoot louse!" gritted the man. He reached down suddenly and grasped the butt of his six-shooter.

Like a flail, the young man's right arm shot out, the fist crashing against the half-breed's jaw. The half-breed collapsed in a heap on the ground. There was a sudden movement in the crowd, and pistols flashed in the sunlight. The young man took a backward step, halted, drew himself up and faced them, his lips curling.

"Go ahead—shoot," he said bitterly.

HE heard a rustle beside him, and turned to see the girl standing within a foot of him, the ivory-handled pistol in hand, her eyes flashing coldly.

"I don't think that any of them are going to shoot," she declared evenly, her voice resounding in the sudden silence that had fallen; "Big Bill got just what he deserved, and this gentleman will not be molested. He isn't armed," she said, with a dry laugh; "shooting him would be murder, and if he is shot I promise to avenge him immediately." Several of the men stealthily sheathed their weapons and stepped back.

"I think Big Bill is able to fight his own battles," continued the girl, taking advantage of the evident reluctance of the men to force trouble.

Her face became slightly paler as she saw the big man sit up and stare about him. He got to his feet and stood, swaying dizzily for an instant, and then his gaze sought out the young man and was fixed on him with foreboding malignance. His right hand fell to his holster, and finding no weapon there he turned and sought it, finding it, and returning to a point near the young man, the weapon in hand. As he halted there was another movement and the half-breed was on his feet and dragging at his revolver. The young man crouched, prepared to spring, and the big man spoke sharply to the half-breed.

"Quit it!" he said, snarling. "Mind your own business!" Then he seemed to realize that the half-breed had been worsted also, for he looked at the latter, saw the dust on his clothing and grinned expressively.

"So he got you too, did he, Yuma?" His heavy features wreathed into a mocking sneer as he faced the young man.

"Knocked me down!" he said in a silky, even voice. "Knocked me cold with a punch. Knocked Yuma Ed down too!" He took another step toward the young man and surveyed him critically.

"I ain't shooting you," he said. "I've got an idea that you and me will meet again. Shooting you wouldn't half pay you back. Mark that, stranger—shooting you wouldn't half pay you back."

He stepped away from the young man, motioning the other men into the door

through which they had emerged to come to his assistance, and they filed slowly in without protest. The big man paused long enough to look again at the young man.

"Knocked me down!" he said as though scarcely able to realize the truth; "knocked me cold with a punch!" He laughed, his coarse features twisting into an odd expression. "Well, I'll be damned!" He turned abruptly and disappeared through the door through which the other men had gone.

For an instant the young man stood, looking after him. Then he turned and saw the young woman, standing near her pony, regarding him with grave eyes.

"Thank you," she said. He caught a flashing smile and then she was in the saddle, loping her pony down the street toward the station. For a moment the young man looked after her and then with a smile he returned to his suit cases and was off down the street toward the courthouse, which he saw in the distance.

CHAPTER II

THE young man walked rapidly down the board walk, entered the courthouse, and paused before a door upon which appeared the legend: "United States District Court. J. Blackstone Graney." The young man set his suit cases down, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, and then knocked on the door. A voice inside immediately admonished him to "come in." The young man turned the knob and opened the door, standing on the threshold. A man seated at one of the windows of the room was gazing steadily out at the vast, dry, sun-scorched country. He turned at the young man's entrance and got slowly to his feet, apparently waiting for the visitor to speak.

"Are you Judge Graney?" the young man questioned.

The judge nodded and the young man smiled slightly. "I'm Kent Hollis," he said.

"I have been expecting you," he said seating himself at his desk. "Take a chair." He waited until the young man had drawn a chair opposite him and then he leaned over the desk and stretched out his hand in greeting. "I'm glad to see you," he continued cordially. He held the young man's hand for an instant, peering steadily into the latter's unwavering eyes, apparently making a mental estimate of him. Then he dropped the hand and sat back, a half smile on his face. "You look like your father," he said.

The young man's face clouded. He swallowed a lump in his throat and said nothing.

"I am sorry you could not get here in time," the Judge continued. "We buried your father yesterday."

"I couldn't make it," returned the young man regretfully. "I should have liked to see him before he died. Where did you bury him?"

"We took him out to his ranch—the Circle Bar," returned the judge, "where he said he wanted to be buried when he died. You'll find that the Circle Bar boys have done their best for him—which was little enough. Poor fellow, he deserved something better." He looked keenly at the young man.

Lines of pain came into the latter's face; he bowed his head, nodding at the Judge's words.

"I have always thought that it was his own fault," he said gently. "It might have been different." He looked slowly up at the judge. "Of course you know something of his life, you were his friend—he wrote me a while back, telling me that. I don't pretend to know what came between him and mother," he continued; "mother would never tell and father never mentioned it in his letters. I thought it was drink."

He caught the judge's slow, grave nod and he broke off abruptly, his eyes filling with an expression of resignation. "Well," he said, "it is ended, no matter what did it." He shoved back his chair. "I thank you for what you did for him," he added, rising; "I assure you that if it is possible for me to repay——"

"Sit down," said the judge, waving a hand to the young man's chair. "No thanks are due me. I did only what any friend would do for another. I have arranged for you to go out to the Circle Bar," he informed Hollis as the latter hesitated over resuming his chair. "Neil Norton, your range boss, is to be here at six o'clock with the buckboard." He consulted his watch. "He ought to be here in half an hour—if he is on time. Meantime there are some things I would like to say to you."

Hollis smiled. "Fire away," he directed.

"Don't think my questions impertinent," the judge said gravely, "for I assure you that nothing is further from my mind than

a desire to pry into your affairs. But I take it you will need some advice—which, of course, you may disregard if you wish. I suppose you don't make a secret of your age?"

"No," was the instant reply, given with a grin, "I am twenty-six."

The judge smiled dryly. "We have great ambitions at twenty-six," he said. "I remember that at twenty-six I was rather determined on making the Supreme Court bench. You can see for yourself how far I missed it. I do not say that we never realize our ambitions," he added quickly, "I merely wish to show that in my case they were rather extravagant." He grimaced, continuing with a smile: "You are a college man, of course—I can see that."

HOLLIS nodded. The judge continued: "Went in for athletics—football, and such?" he said. "Well," he added, catching the young man's nod, "it didn't hurt you a particle—it doesn't hurt anybody. Rather prepares a man for hard knocks—if you have decided to live in this country you must expect hard knocks. And I presume you are going to live here?"

"That depends," returned Hollis. "If father has left his affairs in such shape that it is necessary for me to stay here and straighten them out, why of course I shall stay. Otherwise——" He hesitated and laughed quietly, continuing: "Well, I also have an ambition, and if I am compelled to remain here it will have to be sacrificed. It is a rather humble ambition compared to yours," he laughed. "It is journalism. I want to own a newspaper. I am city editor now and in a few years——"

The judge's eyelashes flickered, but his face remained grave. "I am afraid that you will have to remain here. "That is"—he added dryly—"if you expect to realize anything from the property."

"I expect there can't be much property," observed Hollis.

The judge smiled. "A thousand acres of good grass land, some buildings, and"—here the judge's eyes gleamed and he drawled his words—"a newspaper."

Hollis sat erect. "A newspaper!" he gasped. "A newspaper in this country? Why, man, a newspaper——"

The judge laughed. "So you will not have to go back East in order to be able to realize your ambition—you can own a newspaper here—your father's newspaper—the Dry Bottom *Kicker*. It was quite a recent venture; I believe it appeared about a dozen times—intermittently. Ostensibly it was a weekly, but in reality it was printed at those times when your father's affliction sat least heavily upon him. He used to hire a compositor from Las Vegas to set the type—a man named Potter—a worthless sort of fellow, but a genius in his way—when sober. I suspect that much of the matter that went into the *Kicker* emanated from the brain of Dave Potter."

Hollis's smile revealed just a trace of derision. "You don't happen to know how father happened to think that a newspaper would pay—in this place?" he asked.

"I don't remember to have said that the paper made any money for your father," the judge returned slowly; "nor do I remember hearing your father say that he expected it to make any money. As I understand the situation, your father founded the paper on principle. He was after results and he seized upon the idea of founding a newspaper as a means by which to obtain them."

"I plead ignorance," said Hollis. "What particular result did my father desire?"

Judge Graney's eyes gleamed with earnestness. He leaned forward, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"I am going to illustrate my point by giving you a brief history of your father's experiences out here—as I had it from him. He came out here about fifteen years ago and took up a quarter-section of land over on Rabbit-Ear Creek, the present site of the Circle Bar ranch. For quite a few years he was a nester. He prospered and after a few years began to buy land. He finally acquired a thousand acres; he told me that at one time he had about five thousand head of cattle. Of course, these cattle could not live on your father's thousand acres, but the ranges are free and the thousand acres answered very well as a headquarters.

"Eight years ago some men in Santa Fe organized what is known as the Union County Cattlemen's Association. This company secured a section of land adjoining your father's property, on the other side of Rabbit-Ear Creek. The company called its ranch the Circle Cross. Perhaps it strikes you as peculiar that the Association should have chosen a brand so closely resembling your father's. I will digress long enough to explain the action."

The judge drew out a pencil and picked

up a piece of paper that lay near him on the desk, making some crude hieroglyphics and poising his pencil above them.

"Here," he explained, indicating a sketch which he had drawn, "is the Circle Bar brand—a bar within a circle. And this—" indicating another sketch—"is the Circle Cross—a cross within a circle. It is of course, perfectly obvious that all the Circle Cross company had to do when it desired to appropriate one of the Circle Bar cattle was to add a vertical bar to the Circle Bar brand and the brand became the Circle Cross.

"To get back to the main subject. The new company called its ranch the Circle Cross and it erected new building within a few miles of the Circle Bar buildings. Not long after the advent of the new company it tried to buy the Circle Bar, but your father refused to sell. Bill Dunlavey, the Circle Cross manager, attempted to negotiate the purchase of the Circle Bar and when he was met with refusal hard words passed between him and your father. Not long after that your father began to miss cattle—rustlers began a systematic attack upon his herds. Your father recognized this thievery as the work of the Cattlemen's Association and he fought back.

"A NUMBER of times he changed his brand, but each time the company checkmated him. To illustrate: Your father changed his brand to appear thus": The judge drew again on the paper. "That is the 'Wine-Glass' brand. You can see that it resembles a wine glass when held up vertically, though of course as it appeared on the Circle Bar cattle it lay on its side. But this move was futile, for among the Circle Cross cattle now appeared many branded with the sign of the 'Hour-Glass,' thus": The judge drew again. "This was achieved by merely adding a semi-circle to the wine-glass, closing over the bowl.

"As I have said, your father altered his brand a good many times. But the Circle Bar cattle continued to disappear. Years of warfare followed. The Cattlemen's Association lost no opportunity to harass your father, or, for that matter, all the other small owners in the vicinity. Hired gunmen were imported from Texas and Arizona, men who took delight in the shedding of human blood. These men roamed the ranges, stealing the Circle Bar cattle and killing Circle Bar cowboys. Your father had trouble in keeping men; in order to surround himself with enough men to protect his cattle and resist the aggressions of Dunlavey's hired assassins he was forced to pay ruinous wages.

"Even then he could not prevent rustling. Dunlavey bribed his men; his herds dwindled; he saw that he was facing ruin if he did not devise some means to successfully cope with his enemies. He went over to Santa Fe to see the governor. He was told that the government was powerless; that the same condition existed all over the country, and that the government was unable to combat it. The Law had not come.

"Your father returned home, discouraged but not beaten. He approached the several other small owners in the vicinity, asking for co-operation and assistance. Fearful of Dunlavey's wrath, the small owners refused to organize. But your father decided to carry on the fight alone. He recognized the fact that nothing but the Law could defeat the association's aims, and he determined to force the Law into the Territory. With this end in view he established his newspaper. He succeeded in arousing public interest with the result that a court was established here."

The judge smiled dryly, continuing: "Yes, the Law is here. Or what is more to the point, a representative of the Law is here. 'I am the Law,'" he quoted, ironically. "But my hands are tied. The government at Washington has seen fit to send me here—alone. I can't go out and get evidence; I couldn't secure a conviction if I did. The people here who are not Dunlavey's friends were afraid of him. I can't get a jury. Dunlavey elects the sheriff—controls the election machinery. I am powerless—a mere figurehead. This is the situation in a nutshell. I could go into detail, but I imagine it is plain enough as it is."

"Isn't there an army post near?" Hollis questioned.

"Over at Fort Union—a hundred miles or so southwest. I have pleaded for a detail, but have been informed that it can't be had; that the soldiers are needed to keep the Indians in order. Independent cattlemen are supposed to fight it out alone. At least that is the inference, if we are to consider the attitude of the government."

Hollis was gravely silent. The judge

leaned back in his chair, watching him with a queer expression. He realized that he had said enough to discourage the average young man from remaining in the country a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

HE was not surprised at Hollis's next question; it showed that he was considering the situation from many angles before committing himself.

"What is the condition of Circle Bar ranch at present?" he asked.

"The title to the land is intact and cannot be assailed. But Norton informs me that there are not above two hundred head of cattle on the range. Not a very cheerful prospect?"

Hollis thoughtfully stroked his chin.

"Well, now," he admitted, "I quite agree with you that the prospect isn't cheering. But so long as the condition is such as it it there is no need to grumble. I didn't come out here expecting to fall into a bed of roses."

"Then you won't be disappointed," returned the judge dryly. He filled and lighted a pipe, smoking meditatively. He had determined to push the test a little farther.

"You could probably sell the Circle Bar," he said finally. "Your father told me before he died that he had been offered ten dollars an acre for his land. That would total to a tidy sum."

Hollis looked quickly at the judge, his eyes flashing with grim amusement. "Would you advise me to sell?" he questioned.

The judge laughed quietly. "That is an unfair question," he equivocated, narrowing his eyes whimsically. "If I were heir to the property and felt that I did not care to assume the danger of managing it I should sell, without doubt. If, on the other hand, I had decided to continue my father's fight against an unscrupulous company, I would stay no matter what the consequences. But"—He puffed slowly at his pipe, "it would be so much easier to sell and return at once to a more peaceful atmosphere. With ten thousand dollars you could go back East and go on with your newspaper work, well equipped, with a chance of realizing your ambition—and not be troubled with continuing a fight in which, no doubt, there would be many blows to be taken."

"Thank you," returned Hollis quietly. He looked steadily into the judge's eyes, his own glinting with a grim humor. "You have succeeded in making it very plain," he continued slowly. "But I am not going to run—I have decided on that. Of course I feel properly resentful over the way my father has been treated by this man Dunlavey and his association." His eyes flashed with a peculiar hardness. "And I would stay here and fight Dunlavey and his gang if for no other reason than to secure revenge on personal grounds.

"But there's one other reason. There's a principle at stake. I don't care very much about the personal side of the question; little as I knew my father, I believe he would have ignored personalities were he confronted with the condition that confronts me. It is my belief that as an American citizen he chafed under conditions that prevented him from enjoying that freedom to which we are all entitled under the Constitution. Judging from your conversation you are in entire sympathy with that sentiment." He smiled at the judge. "Of course I am not mistaken?" he added.

The tobacco in the bowl of the judge's pipe spluttered; he brought his right fist heavily down upon the desk, rattling the pens and ink bottles that littered its top. "No, young man; you are not mistaken—you have hit the nail squarely on the head. If you are going to stay here and fight Dunlavey and his crew, Blackstone Graney is with you until——"

"Until the Law comes," suggested Hollis.

"Yes, by thunder!" declared the judge. "You can go further than that and say: 'until the Law rules!' "

JUDGE GRANEY rose and leaned over the desk, taking the young man's hand and holding it tightly. Then he sat down again and resumed smoking. Neither man said a word during the hand-clasp and yet both knew that their hearts and minds were united in a common cause.

Hollis's path of duty lay straight and open before him. There was no by-way that would lead him around the dangers that were sure to beset him. Nor had he thought to search for any. The Law must come. If he could assist in bringing it he would be accomplishing something real and tangible and he would be satisfied.

Judge Graney had long known that the action of the government in sending him to Union County was a poor surrender on the part of the government to the forces in the West which had been long demand-

ing the Law. He had been sent here, presumably to enforce the law, but in reality to silence the government's critics. He was not expected to convict anyone. Theoretically he was supposed to uphold the majesty of the law in Union County, but in reality he merely remained and drew his salary. There was no law to enforce.

"What are your intentions regarding the newspaper—the *Kicker?*" Judge Graney questioned.

Hollis looked up quickly, his face grave. "Perhaps if there had been no *Kicker* here my decision might have been different," he said. "But so long as it is here it is in business to stay!"

"I expect that decision won't please Dunlavey a whole lot," the judge returned.

"Perhaps not," drawled Hollis; "still, we can't aim to please everybody. I expect I might be able to get hold of that printer—Potter I believe you called him?"

"Potter won't be hard to find," assured the judge. "When you get ready to get the *Kicker* out just let me know; I promise to have Potter on hand."

To the ears of the two men came a rattle of wheels and a voice. The judge leaned back in his chair and looked out through the window. His face wreathed into a broad smile as he resumed his former position and looked at Hollis. "Your range boss is here," he said.

They heard a step on the board walk, and a man stood in the doorway looking at them.

The newcomer gave an instant impression of capability. He stood on the threshold, entirely composed, serene eyed, absolutely sure of himself. His wide brimmed sombrero, carelessly dented in the crown, was shoved rakishly back from his forehead, and sagging from his slim waist was a well filled cartridge belt and at the right hip a heavy revolver.

"Howdy, judge!" he said with a smile, in response to Judge Graney's cordial greeting.

"Just come in?" questioned the judge.

"Been in town an hour," returned Norton.

He flashed a searching glance at Hollis, which that young man met steadily. The thought crossed Hollis's mind that the buckboard that he had seen in front of a store soon after leaving the station must have been Norton's. But now Norton was speaking again and Hollis listened.

"Dropped into the Fashion to see my friend Red Eggers," resumed Norton, smiling broadly. "Same old crowd—Dunlavey, Yuma Ed, Ten Spot, Greasy—most of the bunch which has been makin' things interestin' for us hereabouts."

At the mention of "Yuma Ed" Hollis looked up. That was the name of the second man he had struck in the affair near the Fashion Saloon. He wondered if Norton knew. But the judge was now introducing him to Norton and he stood up, holding the latter's hand and meeting his inspecting gaze fairly. He found that the range boss was fully as tall as he; indeed, Hollis discovered that he was compelled to look up slightly in order to meet the latter's level gaze.

"So you're Jim Hollis's boy?" said Norton. "My new boss?" He grinned, evidently willing to go more than half way in forming a friendship with his "new boss." "I don't reckon that you're much stuck on this here country—much as you've seen of it?"

"I've been used to keeping busy," laughed Hollis, "and my impression is that it seems rather dull out here."

NORTON'S eyelashes flickered. He deliberately closed one eye at the judge, carefully averting his face so that Hollis could not see.

"So you're lookin' for action?" he said to Hollis in a grave voice. "Mebbe it ain't none of my business," he added, his eyes gleaming, "but I'm askin' you if you're thinkin' to stay in this country—keepin' your dad's ranch an' his newspaper?"

Hollis nodded. Norton's eyes gleamed with a savage delight. "Swell!" he declared. "If you stay here you'll get plenty of action. I was afraid you wouldn't stay." He turned to Judge Graney, a grin of satisfaction on his face. "I'm tellin' you somethin' that will tickle you a heap," he said. "I told you that I had stopped in Red Egger's saloon. I did. Dunlavey's bunch was feelin' mighty sore over somethin'. I stayed there a while, tryin' to find out what it was all about, but there wasn't none of them sayin' anything to me. But pretty soon I got Red over into a corner an' he told me. Accordin' to him Dunlavey had corraled that Hazelton girl outside an' was tellin' her somethin' pretty strong when a tenderfoot, which hadn't any regard for Dunlavey's delicate feelin's, up an' lambasted him in the jaw!"

"Struck him?" queried the judge, grinning delightedly.

"Knocked him cold," affirmed Norton, his eyes dancing. "Then Yuma busted in an' thought to work his guns. He got his'n, too. That there tenderfoot didn't have no respect for guns. Red says he never thought any man could hit so hard. It must have been sumptuous!" He laughed delightedly. "I'd like to shake hands with that tenderfoot—he's my friend!"

Hollis pulled out a cigar case, selected a cigar, lighted it, and smoked in silence.

So her name was Hazelton. Admiration over the manner in which she had held the men at bay before Dunlavey got to his feet still lingered; she had impressed him deeply. But a deeper satisfaction overshadowed his thoughts of the girl, for he had slugged Dunlavey, his father's enemy.

He heard Norton make an exclamation of surprise, and looking up he saw him holding his right hand out, the palm upward, examining it. There was a splotch of blood on the palm and another on the under side of the thumb.

"Shucks!" Norton was saying. "Now where in thunder did I get that?" He looked again at the hand and then suddenly dove forward to Hollis's side, seized his right hand, peered at the knuckles and held the hand triumphantly aloft.

"I reckon this is where I got it!" he grinned.

HOLLIS looked ruefully down on his knuckles. The skin was gashed—evidently where it had come in contact with a bone in either Dunlavey's or Yuma's jaw. He had intended to keep the story to himself. But he saw that Norton had stepped back and was gazing soberly at the suitcases, which Hollis had deposited near the door. Norton suddenly let out a chirp of delight.

"Two of them!" he said, suppressing his excitement; "Two grips! Red Eggers said there was two an' that the tenderfoot had come down toward the court house!" He walked to Hollis and halted in front of him, looking at him with admiration and satisfaction.

"Own up now!" he said. "You ain't tellin' us that it wasn't you! You durn tenderfoot! Here I've been waitin' for years to get a crack at that big four-flusher, an' here you come, a-fannin' along from your little old East an' get ahead of me!" He stifled a cackle of mirth. "An' so you're lookin' for action? Lordy! If you don't call what you done to Dunlavey an' Yuma action this country's goin' to set up an' take notice when you get to goin' in earnest!"

Judge Graney loomed somberly over the desk. "I suppose it must have been you?" he said gravely.

Hollis nodded. "I may as well confess," he said. "I saw a man giving a young lady a mighty bad moment and I slugged him. Another man started to pull a gun and I slugged him, too. That was all."

The judge sat down again, his face slightly pale. A significant glance passed between him and Norton, but the latter laughed grimly.

"I reckon he's opened the ball, right off the reel," he suggested.

Judge Graney drew a deep breath. "Yes," he returned. "I suppose that way is as good as any other. It was bound to come anyway. It will be war to the finish now!"

CHAPTER III

IN the two weeks that followed his arrival at Dry Bottom, Hollis had much time to meditate upon the great change that had come into his life.

It had seemed to him, as two weeks before he had ridden away from the court house—sitting on the seat of the buckboard beside Neil Norton, his suitcases tucked snugly away underneath—that he was once and for all severing his connections with the big, bustling world in which he had formerly moved.

The picture of his journey to the Circle Bar ranch was still fresh in his mind. The long twilight had brought its lengthening shadows that night before Norton had struck the Circle Bar trail, and before they had traveled a mile of the ten that lay before them night had come. Hollis had been little inclined to talk and Norton did not disturb him, but gave his attention to the horses. There had been no moon and few stars, and darkness, as under a blanket, had settled over them before they were many miles from Dry Bottom.

The country seemed nothing more than a vast plain, broken here and there by ridges and depressions.

Once during the ride Norton broke the silence with a subdued cackle of mirth, and at another time he laughed aloud.

"I'd like to have seen Big Bill when you hit him!" he observed, regret in his voice. "I reckon he might have been just a little surprised!"

To which Hollis made no reply. At another time Norton broke the silence long enough to inquire:

"I reckon mebbe you wouldn't have hit him so hard if you'd knowed who he was?"

"I think I should have hit a little harder," returned Hollis quietly.

"Why, hell!" declared Norton with a laugh; "I reckon you would have done just that!"

About ten o'clock they came in sight of some straggling posts, and Norton assured Hollis that the posts were strung with wire, forming a fence which skirted one side of the Circle Bar pasture. A few minutes later a dog barked and at Norton's call came bounding up to the buckboard, yipping joyously. Hollis could make out his shape as he cavorted about.

"My dog," offered the range boss. "Half wolf, the other half just dog." He chuckled over his joke. "Best dog you ever see," he boasted; "money couldn't buy him. Like dogs?"

Hollis nodded and then realizing that Norton could not see him in the darkness, voiced a quick "yes."

In the distance Hollis saw a sudden square of light illuminate the wall of darkness into which they had been driving; a door had been opened. Hollis saw several figures flit out of the door-way. Norton drove the horses close to the building and brought them to a halt with a sonorous "whoa"! Then he turned to Hollis and spoke with a drawl: "This here building is the Circle Bar bunkhouse; them's some of your men."

Hollis remarked the size of the building and Norton laughed grimly. "There was a time when it wasn't any too big," he said. "Five years ago your dad had twenty-seven men on the pay-roll. If Dunlavey an' his damn association hadn't showed up he'd have had them yet." He turned toward three men who were lounging in the doorway. "Hey, you guys!" he yelled; "this here's your new boss. If you-all ain't glued there you might grab his grips an' tote them up to the ranch house. Tell the missus that I'll be along directly with the boss."

Two men sprang forward to the buckboard and Hollis saw his suitcases disappear into the darkness in the direction of a light that he now saw flickering from some little distance. He jumped out of the buckboard and saw another man spring to the horses' heads and lead them away into the darkness. Then he followed Norton into the light from the open doorway. Presently he was shaking hands with a man who stood there, whose chief articles of raiment were overalls, boots, and a woolen shirt. Almost instantly, it seemed, two of the others had returned and Norton was introducing them as "Ace," "Lanky," and "Weary."

HOLLIS found himself inside the bunkhouse, where he was critically inspected by the three men—and before he left, by the fourth, who answered to the name of "Bud." Norton hold him that these four comprised his outfit—Bud acting as blacksmith. Hollis remained with the men only long enough to announce that there would be no change; that he intended to hang on and fight for his rights. When Norton told them that Hollis had already begun the fight by slugging Dunlavey and Yuma Ed, the enthusiasm of the four men was unbounded. They assured him profanely that they were with him to the "finish"—whatever it might be. After which Hollis departed to the ranchhouse.

He found Mrs. Norton to be a pleasant faced woman of twenty-seven or eight, who had—according to Norton—"bossed him for seven years." Norton grinned hugely over his wife's embarrassed protest.

"I haven't 'bossed' him," she told Hollis, while Norton looked on with amusement, "though there have been times when he richly deserved it."

After partaking of a hearty meal Hollis and Norton went out on the porch for a smoke and a talk, and it was near midnight when Hollis tumbled into bed, distinctly pleased with the range boss and his charming wife. He was asleep within five minutes.

The sun was streaming into his window when he hopped out of bed the next morning, refreshed and eager to make a trip of inspection over his property. He came down stairs lightly, in the hope of being able to slip outside without disturbing anybody, but upon opening the stair door he was surprised to find the cloth on the table in the dining room already spread and hot food steaming upon it. Mrs. Norton was bustling about from the kitchen to the dining room. Evidently the Nortons had been astir for hours.

Mrs. Norton smilingly directed him to a wash basin on a bench just outside the door and stood in the opening a moment, watching him as he drenched his face with the cold water.

"Neil has gone down into the big basin to look after the men," she told him from the doorway. "I don't expect him to return for some little time. Come in to breakfast when you are ready."

To his protest that he would wait until Norton's return before breakfasting she replied with a smile that her husband had already breakfasted, telling him also that in this part of the country everyone rose with the sun.

He stood on the edge of the porch for a moment after washing, drinking in the air that came to him from the plains. When he entered the house Mrs. Norton was nowhere to be seen and he drew up a chair and breakfasted alone.

A little later he embarked upon a tour of inspection. All of the buildings, with the exception of the ranchhouse, which was constructed of logs—were built of adobe, low, squat structures with flat roofs. There were six of them—the bunkhouse, mess house, blacksmith shop, the range boss's private shack (from which Norton and his wife had removed after the death of the elder Hollis), the stable, and one other building for the storing of miscellaneous articles. He was leaning on the top rail of the corral fence after he had concluded his trip of inspection when he heard a clatter of hoofs behind him and turned to observe Norton, just riding up. The range boss wore a grin of pleasure.

"How you findin' things?" he questioned.

"Pretty good," smiled Hollis.

Norton looked critically at him. "You ain't changed your mind about stayin' here?"

"No," returned Hollis; "I believe I'll get used to it in time."

Norton dismounted, his eyes alight with satisfaction. "That's the stuff!" he declared. He threw the reins over his pony's head and seized Hollis by an arm. "Come along with me—down to my shack," he said; "I've got somethin' to show you."

Without further words he led Hollis toward a building—the one he had occupied previous to the death of the elder Hollis. There were three rooms in the building and in the front one were several articles of furniture and some boxes. One of these boxes Norton opened, taking therefrom several articles of wearing apparel, consisting of a pair of corduroy trousers, a pair of leather chaps, boots, spurs, two woolen shirts, a blue neckerchief, a broad felt hat, and last, with a grin of amusement over Hollis's astonished expression, a cartridge belt to which was attached a holster containing a Colt .45.

"I bought this outfit over at Santa Fé two months ago," he informed Hollis, "expectin' to wear them myself some day. But when I got home I found they didn't quite fit." He surveyed Hollis with a critical eye. "I've been thinkin' ever since you come that you'd fit pretty snug in them." He raised a protesting hand as Hollis was about to speak. "I ain't givin' them to you," he grinned. "But you can't wear no tenderfoot clothes out here. Some day when we're together an' we've got time you can blow me to another outfit." He leaned over and tapped the butt of the Colt. "You ever handle one of them?" he questioned.

HOLLIS nodded. Once during a shooting tournament he had done good work with a pistol. But Norton laughed at his nod.

"Mebbe we do it a little different out here," he smiled. "You hop into them duds an' we'll go out into the cottonwood yonder an' try out your gun."

He went out and fifteen minutes later Hollis joined him, looking thoroughly at home in his new outfit. An hour later they returned to the corral fence, where Norton caught up his pony and another, saddling the latter for Hollis. He commented briefly upon the new owner's ability with the six-shooter.

"You use your fists a little better than you use a gun," he remarked, "but I reckon that on the whole you'll be able to take care of yourself—after you've had a little practise gettin' your gun out."

Together they made a round of the basin, returning to the ranchhouse for dinner. Hollis was saddle weary and when Norton proposed another trip during the afternoon he was met with the response that the new owner purposed enjoying the cool of the ranchhouse porch for the remainder of the day.

This had taken place just twelve days ago, yet every little impression still remained fresh in Hollis's mind.

This morning, directly after breakfast

Hollis and Norton had saddled their horses and ridden out of the basin toward the river, into a section of the country that Hollis had not yet explored. Emerging from the basin, they came to a long, high ridge. On its crest Norton halted. Hollis likewise drew in his pony. From here they could see a great stretch of country, sweeping away into the basin beneath it.

"This here's 'Razor-Back' ridge," explained Norton as the ponies halted; "called that on account of bein' so unusually narrow on the top." He pointed to some buildings off in the distance. "Them's the Circle Cross buildings," resumed Norton. "They're about three miles from the Circle Bar ranchhouse, directly north. Down below there—where you see them two big cottonwood trees—is 'Big Elk' crossin'. There's another somethin' like it back up the crick a ways, on the other side of the ranchhouse, called the 'Narrows.'" He laughed grimly. "But we don't use them crossin's much—they're dead lines; generally you'll find there's a Circle Cross man or so hangin' around them—with a rifle. So it don't pay to go monkeyin' around there unless you've got pressin' business."

He made a grimace. "It's my opinion that a good many Circle Bar cattle have crossed the crick in them two places—never to come back."

He turned to Hollis, looking at him with a quaint smile. "From here you can see everything that amounts to anything in this section—which ain't a heap."

HOLLIS smiled. "I like it," he said quietly, "much better than I did when I came." He turned to Norton with a whimsical smile. "I suppose it will strike you as peculiar, but I've got a notion that I would like to ride around a while alone. I don't mean that I don't like your company, I do. But the notion has just struck me."

Norton laughed. "I reckon I won't consider that you're trying to slight me," he returned. "I know exactly how you feel; that sort of thing comes over everybody who comes to this country—sooner or later. You'll have to have it out with yourself."

His voice grew serious. "But don't go ridin' too far. An' keep away from the river trail."

In spite of his ready acquiescence he sat for some time on his pony watching Hollis as the latter urged his pony along the ridge. Just before Hollis disappeared down the slope of the ridge he turned and waved a hand to Norton, and the latter, with a grim, admiring smile, wheeled his pony and loped it over the back trail.

Once down the slope of the ridge Hollis urged his pony out in the level of the basin, through some deep saccatone grass, keeping well away from the river trail as advised by the range boss.

After riding for more than an hour he came to a shallow draw and urged his pony through the deep sand of its center. On the other side of the draw the country became suddenly rocky; great boulders were strewn indiscriminately about, as though some giant hand had distributed them carelessly, without regard to their final resting place. A lava bed, looming gray and dead under a barren rock hill, caught his attention, and he drew his pony to a halt and sat quietly in the saddle examining it.

It was a magnificent country; he did not now regret his decision to remain here. He pulled out his watch, noting that its hands pointed to ten, and realized that he must be off if he expected to reach the Circle Bar by noon.

He sat erect in the saddle, about to wheel his pony toward the draw through which he had entered, when he heard a sharp sound. Startled, he glanced swiftly to his right. He stiffened slowly in the saddle, his face gradually paling. Not over a hundred feet from him, partly concealed by a big boulder, stood a man with a rifle, the muzzle of the weapon trained fairly on him.

CHAPTER IV

HOLLIS was not frightened, though he was in a position that might have aroused fear or apprehension in any man's mind. He was alone, the man had him covered with the rifle, and assuredly this was one of Dunlavey's hirelings.

Hollis glanced swiftly around. Certain signs—some shrubbery that he saw through the canyon, a bald butte or two rising in the distance—told him that he was near the river. And Norton had told him to keep away from the river trail. In his

eagerness to explore the country he had forgotten all about Norton's warning.

For a little time the man remained motionless and Hollis sat quiet, looking at him. The weapon had not moved; its muzzle still menaced him and he watched it closely, wondering whether the man would give him any warning when about to pull the trigger.

Many minutes dragged and the man did not move. A slow anger began to steal over Hollis; the man's inaction grated on his nerves.

"Well!" he challenged sharply. "What do you want?"

There was no answer. Hollis could see only the man's head and shoulders projecting above the boulder, and the rifle—steady and level—menacing him. With an exclamation of rage and disdain he seized the bridle rein and pulled sharply on it, swinging the pony's head around. The rifle crashed venomously; Hollis felt the right sleeve of his shirt flutter, and he pulled the pony abruptly up.

"Just to show you!" came the man's voice, mockingly. "If you move again until I give the word you won't know where you've been hit!"

Hollis was satisfied—the man undoubtedly meant business. He settled back into the saddle and looked down at his shirt sleeve. The bullet had passed very close to the arm. If the man had meant the bullet for that particular spot he was a deadly marksman. In the face of such marvelous shooting Hollis did not care to experiment further. But his anger had not yet abated.

"You're probably enjoying yourself!" he said with bitter sarcasm. "But the pleasure is all yours. I don't like the idea of being a target!"

A laugh came back to Hollis—a strange, unnatural, sardonic cackle that, in spite of his self control, caused his flesh to creep. And then the man's voice:

"No, you don't like it. I knew that all along. But you're going to stay here for seven weeks while I shoot holes in you!" He laughed again, his voice high and shrill, its cackling cadences filling the place.

"Seven weeks in Devil's Hollow!" came the voice again. "Seven weeks! Seven weeks!"

Hollis felt his heart thumping heavily against his ribs, while a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach told him that his courage was touched. He realized now why the man had not shot him down immediately. He was a maniac!

It was some seconds before he regained control of himself, and then he steadied himself in the saddle, assuring himself in a burst of bitter, ironic humor that death at the hands of a crazy man could be no worse than death at the hands of a rational one.

He looked up again, a defiant smile on his lips, to see that both man and rifle had disappeared. In a flash he saw his chance and took advantage of it. In an instant he was off his pony; in another he was behind a convenient rock, breathing easier, his senses alert. For some little time he remained in the shelter of the rock, awaiting the other man's movements. He did not doubt that acting upon some freakish impulse, the man had left his boulder and was even now stalking him from some other direction. He peered carefully about him.

The man was nowhere to be seen. Hollis waited some little time and then taking another glance and not seeing the man, rose slowly to his feet and crouched. Then, filled with a sudden, reckless impulse, he sprang for another rock a dozen feet distant, expecting each instant to hear the crash of the man's rifle. But he succeeded in gaining the shelter of the other rock intact. Evidently the man was looking for him in some other direction.

EMBOLDENED with his success he grimly determined on advancing to another rock some twenty or thirty feet farther on. As in the first instance he succeeded in gaining it in safety. His maneuvering had been circuitous, bringing him into a position from which he could see partly behind the rock where the man had been concealed.

And now, having gained the second rock in safety, Hollis decided to take no more chances. Sooner or later, he was convinced, the man was sure to see him as he jumped. Therefore his actions were now marked with more caution. It took him a long time to gain a position where he could peer over the upper edge of the rock behind which he was concealed. But he gained it finally and then dropped back with an exclamation of surprise. He had caught a glimpse of the man. He was lying

face upward behind the boulder, his arms outstretched, his rifle lying in the dust near him. With a grim laugh Hollis sprang over the few feet that separated him from the man, and approached him carefully.

The man's face bore a curious pallor, his eyes were wide open and staring, and some foam flecked his lips. Evidently he had been overcome by a paroxysm of his malady.

Hollis stepped back and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he stepped over to where the man's rifle lay, taking it up and removing the cartridges. Returning to the man he removed the cartridges from his belt and drew his six-shooter from its holster, determined that when the man recovered from his stupor there would be no danger of a recurrence of the previous incident. Then he leaned against the boulder to await the man's recovery.

Ten minutes later, while he still watched the man, he heard a clatter of hoofs. Determined not to be taken by surprise again he drew his own six-shooter and peered cautiously around the edge of the boulder. What he saw caused him to jam the weapon back into its holster very hurriedly. Then he stepped out of his concealment with a red, embarrassed face to greet a young woman whose expression of doubt and fear was instantly replaced by one of pleasure and recognition as she caught sight of him. It was the girl of Dry Bottom.

"Oh!.. she said. "It is you? I was afraid——" And then she saw the man and was off her pony in a flash and at his head, supporting it and pouring something down his throat from the bottle.

She rose presently, embarrassment crimsoning her face. Hollis saw her lips quiver when she turned and spoke to him.

"He will be all right—now," she said, facing Hollis. "He has had another attack of his—his trouble." She looked suddenly up at Hollis.

"You heard what he—Big Bill Dunlavey—said about my brother?" she questioned. Hollis nodded and she continued rapidly, her voice quavering: "Well, he told the truth. That's why it hurts so."

Hollis yielded to a sudden wave of sympathy. She looked so small, so out of place, he felt that whatever he did or said would not help matters. What he did say, however, assisted in restoring her composure.

"I'm glad I slugged him!" he said heatedly.

She turned suddenly to him.

"Oh, it was great!" she declared, her hands clenching at the recollection. "I could have shaken hands with you—with the hand that struck him!"

Hollis smiled whimsically. "I've still got the hand," he said significantly, extending it toward her—"if you have not reconsidered." He laughed as she took it and pressed it firmly. "I rather think that we've both got a shake coming on that," he added. "I didn't understand then about your brother or I would have added a few extra pounds to that punch."

Her face clouded as he mentioned her brother. "Poor Ed," she said in a low voice. "These attacks do not come often," she volunteered. "But they do come," she added, her voice catching. Hollis did not reply, feeling that he had no right to be inquisitive. But she continued, slightly more at ease.

"Ed was injured a year ago through a fall," she informed Hollis. "He was breaking a wild horse and a saddle girth broke and he fell, striking on his head. The wound healed, but he has never been the same. At intervals these attacks come on and then he is irresponsible—and dangerous." She shuddered. "You were watching him," she added, looking suddenly at him; "did you find him as he is or did he attack you? Frequently when he has these attacks he comes here to Devil's Hollow, explaining that he expects to find some of Dunlavey's men. He doesn't like Dunlavey since Dunlavey told him that he wanted to marry me. But Ed says that Dunlavey has a wife in Tucson and—well, I wouldn't have married him anyway—the brute!"

"Exactly," agreed Hollis gravely, "of course you couldn't marry him." He understood now the meaning of Dunlavey's words to her in Dry Bottom. "If you wasn't such a damn prude," he had said. He looked at the girl with a sudden, grim smile. "He said something about running you and your brother out of the country," he said; "of course you won't allow him to do that?"

THE girl's slight figure stiffened. "I would like to see him try it!" she declared defiantly.

Hollis grinned. "That's the stuff!" he sympathized. "I rather think that Dunlavey is something of a bluffer—that folks in this country have allowed him to have his own way too much."

She shook her head doubtfully. "I don't know about that."

Her brother suddenly sighed and struggled to sit up. The girl was at his side in an instant, assisting him. The young man's bewilderment was pitiful. He sat silent for a full minute, gazing first at his sister and then at Hollis, and finally at his surroundings. Then, when a rational gleam had come into his eyes he bowed his head, a blush of shame sweeping over his face and neck.

"I expect I've been at it again," he muttered, without looking up.

The girl leaned over him, reassuring him. Hollis stepped forward and seized the young man by the arm, helping him to his feet.

"You're all right now," he assured him; "there's been no harm done."

Standing, the young man favored Hollis with a careful inspection. He flushed again. "You're the man that rode through the draw," he said. "I saw you and thought you were one of Dunlavey's men. I shot at you once, and was going to shoot again, but something cracked in my head. I hope I didn't hit you.

"Of course you're not one of Dunlavey's men," he added, "or you wouldn't be here, talking to sis. No friend of Dunlavey's could do that." He looked searchingly at Hollis. "I've never seen you before," he said. "Who are you?"

"I am Kent Hollis."

The young man's eyes lighted. "Not Jim Hollis's son?" he asked.

Hollis nodded. The young man's face revealed genuine pleasure. "You going to stay in this here country?" he asked.

"I am going to run the Circle Bar," returned Hollis slowly.

"Bully!" declared the young man. "There's some folks around here said you wouldn't have nerve enough to stay." He made a wry face. "But I reckon you've got nerve or you'd have hit the breeze when I started to stampede." He suddenly held out a hand. "I like you," he said impulsively. "You and me are going to be friends. Shake!"

Hollis saw a smile of pleasure light up the girl's face.

Hollis stood near the boulder, watching them as they prepared to depart, the girl telling her brother that he would find his pony on the plains beyond the canyon.

"I am glad I didn't hit you," the young man told Hollis as he started away with the girl. "If you are not scared off you might take a run down to the shack some time—it's just down the creek a ways."

Hollis hesitated and then, catching the girl's glance, he smiled.

"I can't promise when," he said, looking at the girl, "but you may be sure that I will look you up the first chance I get."

He stood beside the boulder until he saw them disappear around the wall of the canyon. Then with a satisfied grin he walked to his pony, mounted, and was off through the draw toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

CHAPTER V

RUMOR, that mysterious disseminator of news whispered that the Dry Bottom *Kicker* was to come to life. Wherefore curiosity led many of Dry Bottom's citizens past the door of the *Kicker* office to steal covert glances at the young man whose figure was bent over the desk inside. Many passed in silence after looking at the young man—he did not see them. Others commented gravely or humorously according to their whim—the young man did not hear them. Seated at the desk he gave his attention to the tasks before him—he was not concerned with rumor; the curiosity of Dry Bottom's citizens did not affect him. Seriously, methodically, steadily, he worked at his desk, while rumor wagged her tongues and curiosity lounged past the window.

It was Hollis's first visit to the *Kicker* office; he had come to work and there was much that he could do. He had found the *Kicker* installed in a one story frame building, verging upon dilapidation.

The interior, however was quite complete and well equipped. A man stood before one of the type cases distributing type. He did not look up at Hollis's entrance.

"Hello!" greeted Hollis.

The man hesitated in his work and looked up. "Hello," he returned, perfunctorily.

"I suppose your name is Potter?" Hollis inquired cordially. Judge Graney had told him that if he succeeded in finding the compositor he would have him at the *Kicker* office this morning. Potter had gone to work without further orders.

"Yes," said the man.

"I am the new owner of the *Kicker*," Hollis informed him with a smile.

"Jim Hollis's boy?" inquired Potter, straightening. At Hollis's nod he stepped quickly forward and grasped the hand the latter offered him, squeezing it tightly. "Of course you are Jim Hollis's boy!" he said, finishing his inspection. "You're the living image of him!" He swept his hand around toward the type case. "I'm working, you see. Is it true that the *Kicker* is going to be a permanent institution?"

"The *Kicker* is here to stay!" Hollis informed him.

Potter's face lighted with pleasure. "That's great!" he said. "That's swell!"

He was of medium height, slender, lean faced, with a magnificent head, and a wealth of brown hair thickly streaked with silver. In the first flashing glance which Hollis had taken at him he had been aware that here was a person of more than ordinary mental ability and refinement. It was with a pang of pity that he remembered Judge Graney's words to the effect that he was a good workman—"when sober." Hollis felt genuinely sorry for him.

"I have had a talk with Judge Graney," volunteered Potter. "He tells me that you are a newspaper man. Between us we ought to be able to get out a very respectable paper."

"We will," calmly announced Hollis; "and we'll get the first issue out Saturday. Come in here and we'll talk about it."

He led the way to the front room and seated himself at the desk, motioning Potter to another chair. Within the next hour he knew all about the *Kicker*. It was a six-column sheet of four pages.

"OK, let's get started," said Hollis. "We'll cut out a lot of these syndicated articles. We don't want a paper filled with stale stuff on snakes, ocean disasters, Egyptian monoliths, and the latest style in opera hats. We'll fill the paper with local news—we'll ginger things up a little. You are pretty well acquainted here—I'll leave the local items to you. What town near here compares with Dry Bottom in size?"

"There's Lazette," returned Potter; "over in Colfax County."

"Got a newspaper?"

"Yes; the *Eagle*."

"Bully! Step on the *Eagle's* toes. Make the *Eagle* scream. Get into an argument with it about something—anything. Tell Lazette that as a town it's forty miles behind Dry Bottom. That will stir up public spirit and boom our subscription list. You see, Potter, civic pride is a big asset to a newspaper. We'll start a row right off the reel. Furthermore, we're going to have some telegraph news. I'll make arrangements for that to-day."

HOLLIS'S enthusiasm was infectious. "I'm going to set up the head for the first page," he said. "Probably you'll want a slogan."

"We'll have one," returned Hollis briskly. "Set this in triple leads: *'We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay!'*"

"Good!" declared Potter. He went into the composing room. Hollis turned to his desk.

Looking over the old copy of the *Kicker* he studied some of the advertisements. Evidently some Dry Bottom merchants had been brave enough to antagonize Dunlavey by advertising in the *Kicker*. With this copy of the *Kicker* in hand Hollis rose from his desk, told Potter he was going out, and proceeded to visit some of the merchants whose advertisements appeared in the paper, hoping that their bravery still abided with them. He made a good solicitor. Some of the merchants flatly refused, saying they did not care to risk Dunlavey's anger. Others demurred, confidentially announcing that they had never considered the paper seriously. Half a dozen listened quietly while he told them that the *Kicker* was in Dry Bottom to stay and then smiled and told him to run their advertisements. They rather admired his "nerve" and were not afraid of Dunlavey.

At noon Hollis stepped into a restaurant called the Alhambra. While he ate he was critically inspected; the Alhambra swarmed with customers, and the proprietor quietly informed him that he was a "drawin' card" and hoped he'd "grub" there regularly. In return for his promise to do so Hollis secured his advertisement.

Leaving the Alhambra he returned to the *Kicker* office, seating himself again at his

desk. He heard nothing, felt nothing, saw nothing—for his thoughts were miles away.

Something moved behind him. He turned. Dunlavey was standing just inside the door, his great arms folded over his chest. He had been watching Hollis, his eyes narrowed.

Hollis knew that by this time Dunlavey must have discovered his identity. He swung slowly around in his chair.

"Welcome to the *Kicker* office," he said quietly.

Dunlavey did not move. Evidently he had expected another sort of greeting and was slightly puzzled over Hollis's manner. He remained motionless.

"I don't think you mean all of that," he said evenly.

Hollis laughed. "I'm not in the habit of saying things that I do not mean," he said quietly. "I'm here to do business and I'm ready to talk to anybody who wants to do business with me."

Dunlavey's hands fell to his sides and were shoved into his capacious trousers' pockets. "Right," he said tersely: "that's what I'm here for—to talk business."

He pulled a chair over close to Hollis and seated himself in it.

"I recollect meeting you the other day," said Dunlavey after he had become seated. He smiled with his lips. "I'll say that we got acquainted then. There ain't no need for us to shake hands now. I didn't know you then, but I know you now. You're Jim Hollis's boy."

Hollis nodded. Dunlavey continued evenly: "Your father and me wasn't what you might call bosom friends. I reckon Judge Graney has told you that. It don't make any difference. So there won't be any misunderstanding I'll tell you that I ain't figgering on you and me hitching up to the mutual friendship wagon either. I might say that we wasn't introduced right." He grinned evilly. "But I ain't letting what happened interfere with the business that's brought me here to-day. I've heard that you're intending to start the *Kicker* again; that you're figgering on staying here and running the Circle Bar. What I'm here for is to buy you out. I'm offering you fifteen thousand dollars for the Circle Bar and this damn newspaper."

HOLLIS'S face betrayed absolutely no emotion. He clasped one hand over his knee and leaned back in his chair, his gaze meeting Dunlavey's steadily.

"Dunlavey," he said quietly, "what is the actual value of the Circle Bar ranch?"

Dunlavey smiled blandly. "You couldn't find any man around these parts to take it at any price," he returned.

"Why?" questioned Hollis.

Dunlavey grinned mysteriousiy. "I reckon you know why," he returned. "There ain't nobody wants to buy the Circle Bar except me."

"Why?" persisted Hollis.

"I reckon you know that too," laughed Dunlavey. "It ain't no secret. The Cattlemen's Association is running things in this here county and it ain't wanting anyone to buy the Circle Bar except me. And nobody is fool enough to antagonize the Association."

"You are frank about it at any rate," conceded Hollis smiling slightly. "But that doesn't get us anywhere. What I am trying to get at is this: what would the Circle Bar bring in cash if the Cattlemen's Association ceased to be a factor in the county?"

Dunlavey grinned broadly. "For a tenderfoot you're real amusing," he derided. "There ain't nobody out here crazy enough to think that the Cattlemen's Association will ever be put out of business! But if you want to know my personal opinion it's that the Circle Bar might bring thirty thousand."

"Thanks," said Hollis dryly; "that's getting somewhere. And now we'll be able to talk business. We've got thirty thousand to start with. I am told that when the Association began its war against my father he was rather prosperous. Usually he rounded up about two thousand head of cattle. But we'll call it a thousand. We'll say that they brought about thirty dollars a head, which would make an income of thirty thousand dollars a year, gross. We'll deduct fifty per cent for operating expenses, losses, and so on. That would leave about fifteen thousand. You've been fighting the Circle Bar for several years. We'll call it five. Five times fifteen thousand is seventy-five thousand. That represents the sum which my father would have made from the Circle Bar if you had not fought him. Add to that the thirty thousand which you admit would be a fair figure for the ranch if the Association were eliminated as a factor, and we have a total

of one hundred and five thousand dollars." He smiled. "Now we've reached a point where we can get somewhere. I'll take one hundred thousand dollars for the Circle Bar."

The calm announcement had no effect upon Dunlavey except to cause him to grin derisively.

"For a tenderfoot you're pretty slick," he allowed. "You've figgered it out so that it sounds right reasonable. But you've forgot one thing. The Cattlemen's Association ain't eliminated. It says that the Circle Bar is worth fifteen thousand. You'll take that or——" He smiled grimly.

"I think I know what you mean," said Hollis quietly. "You mean that the Cattlemen's Association will continue its fight and eventually ruin the Circle Bar. Perhaps it will—no man can tell what lies in the future. But I can tell you this: you can't retard progress."

"No?" said Dunlavey.

Hollis smiled composedly. He spoke without bitterness. "Dunlavey," he said, "the law must come. It is inevitable. Its coming will be facilitated by such organizations as the Cattlemen's Association and by such men as you. The government at Washington is familiar with the conditions that exist here and sooner or later will be compelled to act. When it does the small cattle owner will receive protection."

"We're holding tight till the law comes," sneered Dunlavey; "which won't be soon."

"Perhaps not," admitted Hollis dryly; "good things come slowly. Meanwhile, if you don't care to accept my figure for the Circle Bar I shall follow your example and hold tight until the law comes."

"Meaning that you won't sell, I suppose?" sneered Dunlavey.

"Meaning just that," returned Hollis quietly. "I am going to fight you. I have offered the Circle Bar at a fair figure and you have responded with threats. I wouldn't sell to you now if you offered one hundred and fifty thousand. The Circle Bar is not for sale!"

DUNLAVEY had not moved. He sat quiet, leaning a little forward, his hands resting on his knees, his eyes narrowed to glittering pin-points as he watched Hollis. When the latter had concluded he leaned back, laughing hoarsely.

"What are you going to do with this damn newspaper?" he demanded.

"The newspaper will be used as a weapon against you," returned Hollis. "It will kick loud and long against such organizations as the Cattlemen's Association—against such men as you. It will appear in every city in the East; the matter that appears in it will be reprinted in Chicago, in Washington, in New York—in fact in every city in which I have a friend engaged in the newspaper business—and I have a number. I am going to stir up sentiment against you. I am going to be the Law's advance agent!"

Dunlavey rose, his lips curling with contempt. "You make me sick!" he sneered. He turned his back and walked to the door, returning and standing in front of Hollis, ominously cool and deliberate. "So that's the how of it?" he said evenly. "You've come out here looking for fight. Well, you'll get it—plenty of it. I owe you something——"

"Wait, Dunlavey," Hollis interrupted, without excitement; "I want you to understand that I'm not afraid of you. I suspect that you'll try to make things interesting for me from now on and I suppose I ought to be properly troubled. But I'm not. I'll not be surprised at anything you do. That's all. Close the door when you go out."

He turned to the desk, ignoring Dunlavey. Sitting there, his senses alert, he heard the door slam. From beyond it came a curse. Silence again reigned in the office; Hollis was alone with the dust and the heat—and some very original thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was mid-July—and hot. The sun shone continually; the nights were uncomfortable, stifling. The dust was everywhere and grew deeper and lighter as the days passed. Water grew scarce; cattle suffered, lowing throughout the night, during the day searching the bogs and water holes for drops of moisture. Men looked up at the clear, cloudless sky and prayed—and cursed—for rain. The rain did not come. It was one long, continuous nightmare of heat.

The *Kicker* had appeared four times—on Saturdays—on time. Telegraphic com-

munication with the outside world had been established. Potter had taken up his residence at the Circle Bar. War had been declared between the *Kicker* and the Lazette *Eagle*. Hollis had written an argumentative essay on the virtues of Dry Bottom as a town, dwelling upon its superiority over Lazette. The editor of the *Eagle* had replied with some bitterness, setting forth in detail why Dry Bottom did *not* compare with Lazette. Hollis had succeeded in arousing the spirit of Dry Bottom's citizens. They began to take some interest in the *Kicker*. Many subscribed; all read it.

In the fourth issue of the paper appeared several new advertisements. Public spirit was aroused to a point where it ignored thoughts of Dunlavey's displeasure.

Upon the Saturday which had marked the first issue of the *Kicker* under Hollis's ownership he had employed a circulation manager. That afternoon on the street near the *Kicker* office he had almost collided with a red haired youth of uncertain age who had bounded out through the door of a private dwelling. In order to keep from knocking the youth over Hollis was forced to seize him by the arms and literally lift him off his feet. While in the air the youth's face was close to Hollis's and both grinned over the occurrence. When Hollis set the youth down he stood for an instant, looking up into Hollis's face and a grin of amusement overspread his own.

"Shucks!" he said slowly. "If it ain't the tenderfoot editor!"

"That's just who it is," returned Hollis with a smile.

The youth grinned as he looked critically at Hollis. "You gittin' out that there paper today, mister?" he questioned.

"Right now," returned Hollis.

"Swell!" exclaimed the youth. He surveyed Hollis with a frank admiration. "They said you wouldn't have the nerve to do it," he said; "but, say! I reckon they ain't got you sized up right!"

Hollis smiled, remembering that though the paper had been printed it was not yet distributed. He placed a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Have you got nerve enough to pass the *Kicker* around to the people of this town?" he questioned.

"I reckon," grinned the youth. "I was comin' down to ast you for the job when you bumped into me. I used to peddle them for your dad. My name's Jiggs Lenehan—mebbe you've heard of me?"

Hollis smiled. "The question of delivering the *Kicker* was one of the details that I overlooked," he said. "But fortunately it is arranged now. Henceforth, Jiggs, you are the *Kicker's* official circulation manager. Likewise, if you care to add to your income, you can help Potter around the office."

So it had been arranged.

In Hollis's "Salutatory" to the people of Dry Bottom he had announced that while he had not come to Dry Bottom for a free fight, he would permit no one to tread on his toes.

The second issue of the *Kicker* was marked by a more aggressive spirit—a spirit engendered by the sympathetic reception of the first issue.

The third issue contained stronger language, and the fourth was energetically aggressive. As he had decided before the first appearance of the paper, he took a certain number of copies of each issue, folded them neatly, stamped and addressed them, and mailed them to a number of newspapers throughout the country whose editors he knew.

He had not seen Dunlavey since the day the latter had come to the *Kicker* office to negotiate for the purchase of the paper. On several of his rides to and from the Circle Bar ranch he had seen signs of life at the Circle Cross; once or twice he thought he saw someone watching him from a hill on the Circle Cross side of the Rabbit-Ear, but of this he was not quite certain.

He had been warned by Norton not to ride too often over the same trail lest Dunlavey send someone to ambush him.

Hollis had laughed at the warning, though thanking Norton for it. He told his range boss that he did not anticipate any immediate trouble with Dunlavey.

"It all depends on how Big Bill feels," returned Norton with a grim smile. "If you've got him mad there's no telling. And there are plenty of places between here and Dry Bottom where a man might be shot from ambush. And nobody'd ever know who done it. I wouldn't ride the Dry Bottom trail every day. There's the old Coyote trail, that takes you past the Razor-Back and through Devil's Hollow to Little

Canyon an' along the hills to the other side."

HE laughed. "There's only one thing you need to be afraid of if you take the Coyote trail, an' that's Ed Hazelton. Ed gets spells when he's plum crazy. He's Nellie Hazelton's brother—her that Dunlavey was pesterin' when you slammed him." He laughed again, significantly. "Though if Ed knowed you was the man who took his sister's part you wouldn't need to be much scared of him—I've heard that he's got a pretty good memory for his friends—even when he's off."

Hollis had not told Norton of his experience in Devil's Hollow, nor did he tell him now. But he followed his advice about taking the Coyote trail, and the following day when he made the trip to Dry Bottom he returned that way. About half way between Dry Bottom and the Circle Bar he came upon a little adobe cabin snuggling an arroyo through which trickled a small stream of water.

It was an ideal location for a small rancher, and Hollis observed that the buildings were in order—evidently Nellie Hazelton and her brother were provident. He saw some cattle grazing on the edge of a small grass plateau which began at the slope of the arroyo through which the stream of water ran. A shout reached his ears as he sat motionless in the saddle looking about him, and he saw Ed Hazelton on the plateau among the cattle, waving a hand to him. The young man began to descend the side of the plateau, but before he had fairly started Nellie Hazelton had come out of the front door of the cabin and stood on the edge of the small porch, smiling at him.

"So you did come, after all?" was her greeting.

Hollis spurred his pony closer and sat smiling down at her. "I don't think anything could have stopped me after your invitation," he returned quickly.

"Oh!" she said. The sudden color that came into her face told of her confusion.

"Won't you get off your horse?" she said while he still sat motionless. "It's quite a while before sundown and you have plenty of time to reach the Circle Bar before dark."

He had determined to discover something of the mystery that surrounded her and her brother, and so he was off his pony quickly and seating himself in a chair that she drew out of the cabin for him. By the time her brother had reached the porch Hollis was stretched comfortably out in the chair and was answering several timid questions concerning his opinion of the country and his new responsibilities.

She was glad he liked the country, she said. It was wonderful. In the five years they had been here they had enjoyed it thoroughly—that was, of course, barring the trouble they had had with Dunlavey.

"Then you are not a Westerner?" Hollis said. "No," she returned; "we—Ed and I—were raised in Illinois, near Springfield. We came out here five years ago."

Ed seemed to be quite recovered from the attack he had suffered in Devil's Hollow and talked freely and intelligently of affairs in the country. Hollis found that on the whole he was a well informed young man—quiet, modest, and apparently well able to give a good account of himself in spite of his affliction.

At sundown Hollis departed, telling the Hazeltons that since he was their neighbor he would not neglect to see them occasionally. As he rode away into the dusk Nellie Hazelton stood on the porch smilingly waving her hand at him. As he threaded his way through the rapidly growing darkness he felt an unaccountable satisfaction over the fact that he had elected to remain in Union County; that henceforth his fortunes were to be linked with those of a brave young woman who was committed to war against their common enemy—Dunlavey.

ON Friday evening previous to the Saturday on which the *Kicker* was to be issued for the fifth consecutive time, Potter did not ride out to the Circle Bar. There still remained some type to be set and Potter had declared his intention of completing the work and staying overnight in town. Hollis had acquiesced and had departed for the Circle Bar alone.

When he reached Dry Bottom the following morning he found a small crowd of people in front of the *Kicker* office. During the night some one had posted a written notice on the front door, and when Hollis dismounted from his pony there were perhaps a dozen interested citizens grouped about the door, reading the notice. They

gave way before Hollis and allowed him to reach the door without molestation, though in passing he observed significant grins on several faces.

The notice was written in a bold, legible hand.

"Mr. Hollis: The express leaves town this afternoon at six o'clock—goin east. Better be on it.—Y. Z."

Hollis read the notice and then without looking at his audience, he produced a pencil and printed boldly on the notice the slogan he had devised:

"We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay! Don't hold the express on my account!—Kent Hollis."

Leaving his audience to stare after him Hollis pushed open the door of the office and entered.

He found Potter bending over the imposing table, hard at work. He looked up and smiled as his chief entered.

"See the notice on the door?" he inquired.

"Some of Dunlavey's work, I suppose," returned Hollis.

"Well, yes. I suppose Dunlavey is back of it. But Yuma tacked the sign up." He smiled soberly. "They tried hard last night to get me to drink. Of course their purpose was to get me drunk so that I wouldn't be able to get the paper out today. I'm not going to tell you how hard I had to fight myself to resist the temptation to drink. But you can see for yourself that I succeeded. The *Kicker* will be ready to go to press in an hour."

He felt Hollis's hand patting his shoulder approvingly and he continued, a little hoarsely. "I took one drink at the Fashion last night after I got through here. Then I came back and went to sleep. I'm a light sleeper and when some time after midnight I heard a sound at the door I got up and peered out of the window. I saw Yuma tacking up the notice. I suppose Dunlavey wrote it." He looked at Hollis with a whimsical expression. "I suppose you are going to take the express?" he inquired.

"Tried to get you drunk, did they?" shaking his head negatively to Potter's question, a smile on his face. "I can't understand that game," he continued, soberly. "Of course getting you drunk would have prevented the appearance of the paper on schedule time. But if they wanted to do serious damage, why didn't they come down here—some of them—during your absence, and smash things up? That would have made the thing sure for them."

Potter laughed mirthlessly. "Of course they could have done that," he said; "it would have been easy—will be easy any time. But it wouldn't be artistic, would be coarse in fact. Dunlavey doesn't do things that way. That would invite sympathy in your behalf. But if they prevent the appearance of your paper without having done any damage to your plant they accomplish something—they expose you to ridicule. And in this country ridicule is a potent weapon—even if it involves nothing more serious than a drunken printer."

Hollis shook Potter's hand in silence. He had expected violence. Not subtlety from Dunlavey.

He went to his desk and sat in the chair, looking out through the window at the crowd that still lingered in front of the office. Most of the faces wore grins. Plainly they were amused, but Hollis saw that the amusement was of a grim sort. Hollis felt that some of his audience must be wondering whether the editor of the *Kicker* would pay any attention to the notice on the door. Would he scare?

HOLLIS had already decided that he would not "scare." He grinned at several of the men who watched him and then turned and instructed Potter to take down a column of type on the first page of the paper to make room for an article that he intended to write. Then he seized a pen and wrote a red hot defiance directed at the authors of the notice, which Potter set up under the heading:

"Why the Editor of the Kicker Won't Take the Express."

In clear, terse language he told his audience his reasons. This was America; he was an American, and he didn't purpose to allow the Cattlemen's Association—or any other association, gang, or individual—to dictate the policy of his paper or influence his private actions. Least of all

did he purpose to allow anyone to "run him out of town." He ended with the prophecy that the law would come into Union County and that meanwhile the *Kicker* purposed to fight.

At noon Hollis took the usual number of copies to the station and mailed them. Walking down the street on his return from the station he attracted much attention. Men stood in the open doorways of saloons watching him, a number openly jeered; others sent subtle jibes after him. Near the *Kicker* office he met Jiggs Lenehan. Followed by the youth he reached the office to find that Potter had completed the press work and that several hundred copies of the paper, the ink still moist on its pages, were stacked in orderly array on the imposing stone. In a very brief time Jiggs burst out of the office door, a bundle of papers under his arm, and began the work of distribution. Standing back from the window with Potter, Hollis watched Jiggs until the latter reached the crowd in front of the Fashion saloon. Then all that Hollis could see of him was his red head.

Presently Jigg's customers in front of the Fashion were all supplied. Then other purchasers appeared. Soon the *Kicker* was being read by—it seemed—nearly every grown person in Dry Bottom.

Hollis watched through the window until he began to be certain that every person in town was supplied with a paper. Then with a grim smile he left the window and sought his chair beside the desk. He was satisfied. Dunlavey had made the first aggressive movement and the fight was on.

CHAPTER VII.

IT was about one o'clock in the afternoon when the *Kicker* appeared on Dry Bottom's street. At about five minutes after one, Potter left the front of the office and walked to the rear room where he halted at the imposing stone. There he proceeded to "take down" the four forms. This done he calmly began distributing type.

While Potter worked Hollis sat very quietly at his desk in the front office. Occasionally Potter glanced furtively at him, his eyes filled with mingled expressions of sympathy, admiration, and concern.

Potter appreciated his chief's position. It meant something for a man of Hollis's years and training to bury himself in this desolate sink-hole; to elect to carry on an unequal war with interests that controlled the law machinery of the county and Territory—whose power extended to Washington. No doubt the young man was even now brooding over the future. Potter's sympathy grew. He thought of approaching his chief with a word of encouragement. But while he hesitated, Hollis turned quickly and looked fairly at him.

"Potter," he remarked, "I suppose there isn't a good brain specialist in this section of the country?"

"Why—why——" began Potter. Then he stopped and looked at his chief in wordless astonishment. His sympathy had been wasted.

"No," laughed Hollis, divining the cause of the compositor's astonishment, "not for me. I was thinking of some other person."

"Not me?" grinned Potter. He flushed a little at the thought of how near he had come to offering encouragement to a man who had not been in need of it. "Perhaps I need one," he added, "a moment ago I thought you were in the dumps on account of the situation here. It surprised me considerably to find that you had not been thinking of Dunlavey at all."

"No," admitted Hollis gravely, "I was not thinking of Dunlavey. I was wondering if something couldn't be done for Ed Hazelton."

"Something ought to be done for him," declared Potter earnestly. "I have watched that young man closely and I am convinced that with proper care and treatment he would recover fully. But I never heard of a specialist in this section—none, in fact, nearer than Chicago. And I've forgotten his name."

"Hammond," supplied Hollis. "I've been thinking of him. I knew his son in college. I'm going to write to him."

He turned to his desk and took up a pen, while Potter resumed his work of distributing type.

About half an hour later Jiggs Lenehan strolled into the office wearing a huge grin on his face. " 'Pears like everybody in town wants to read the *Kicker* to-day," he said with a joyous cackle. "Gimme some more. They's a gang down to the station howlin' for them. Say," he yelled

at Hollis as he went out of the door with a big bundle of *Kickers* under his arm, "you're cert'nly some editor man!"

Hollis finished his letter to Hammond and then leaned back in his chair. For half an hour he sat there, looking gravely out into the street and then, answering a sudden impulse, he rose and strode to the door.

"Going down to the court house," he informed Potter.

He found Judge Graney in his room, seated at his desk, a copy of the *Kicker* spread out in front of him. At his appearance the Judge pushed back his chair and regarded him with an approving smile.

"Well, Hollis," he said, "I see Dunlavey has played the first card."

"He hasn't taken the first trick," was the young man's quick reply.

The Judge grinned. "There is an article on the first page of the *Kicker* which interested me greatly," he said. "It concerns the six o'clock train—going east. Do you happen to know whether the editor of the *Kicker* is going to use the express?"

Hollis smiled appreciatively. "The editor of the *Kicker* is going to use the express," he admitted, "though not in the manner some people are wishing. The usual number of copies of the *Kicker* are going to ride on the express, as are also some very forceful letters to the President of the United States and the Secretary of the Interior."

"Good!" said the Judge. He looked critically at Hollis. "I know that you are going to remain in Dry Bottom," he said slowly; "I have never doubted your courage. But I want to warn you to be careful. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the notice which you found on the door of the *Kicker* office this morning is a joke. They don't joke like that out here. Be careful—there are men out here who would snuff out a human life as quickly as they would the flame of a candle. I shouldn't like to hear of you using your revolver, but if you do have occasion to use it, use it fast and make a good job of it."

"I don't like to use a gun," returned Hollis gravely, "but all the same I shall bear your advice in mind. Frankly, I prefer to use my fists."

JUDGE Graney's gaze rested on the young man. "There is one thing to remember. When you slug a man who carries a gun you only beat him temporarily; usually he will wait his chance and use his gun when you least expect him."

"I suppose you refer to Yuma Ed and Dunlavey?" suggested Hollis.

"Well, no, not Dunlavey. I have never heard of Dunlavey shooting anybody; he plays a finer game. But Yuma Ed, Greasy, Ten Spot, and some more who belong to the Dunlavey crowd are professional gunmen and do not hesitate to shoot."

An hour later, when Hollis sat at his desk in the *Kicker* office, Judge Graney's words were recalled to him. He was thinking of his conversation with the Judge when Jiggs Lenehan burst into the office, breathless, his face pale. He was trembling with excitement.

"Ten Spot is comin' down here to put you out of business!" he blurted out when he could get his breath. "I was in the Fashion an' I heard him an' Yuma talkin' about you. Ten Spot is comin' here at six o'clock!"

Hollis turned slowly in his chair and faced the boy. His cheeks whitened a little. Judge Graney had been right. Hollis had rather expected at some time or other he would have to have it out with Yuma, but he had expected he would have to deal with Yuma himself. He smiled a little grimly. It made very little difference. He looked at his watch and saw that the hands pointed to four. He had two hours to prepare for Ten Spot's coming. He smiled at the boy, looked back into the composing room and saw that Potter had ceased his labors and was watching him soberly. He grinned broadly at Potter and turned to Jiggs.

"How many *Kickers* did you sell?"

"Two hundred an' ten," returned the latter; "everybody bought them." He took a step forward; his hands clenching with the excitement that still possessed him. "I told you Ten Spot was comin' down here to kill you!" he said hoarsely and insistently. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you," smiled Hollis, "and I understand perfectly. How much money did you receive for the two hundred and ten papers?"

"Six dollars an' two bits," responded the boy, regarding Hollis wonderingly.

"It's yours," Hollis informed him; "there was to be no charge for the *Kicker* today."

The boy grinned with pleasure. "Don't you want none of it?" he inquired.

"It's yours," repeated Hollis. He reached out and grasped the boy by the arm, drawing him close. "Now tell me what you heard at the Fashion," he said.

Rapidly, the boy related the conversation he had overheard at the Fashion. When he had finished Hollis patted him approvingly on the back.

"The official circulation manager of the *Kicker* has made good," he said with a smile. "Now go home and take a good rest and be ready to deliver the *Kicker* next Saturday."

The boy backed away and stood looking at Hollis in surprise. "Why!" he said in an awed voice, "you ain't none scared a-tall!"

"I certainly am scared," laughed Hollis; "scared that Ten Spot will change his mind before six o'clock. Do you think he will?"

"No!" emphatically declared the boy. "I don't reckon that Ten Spot will change his mind a-tall." The boy looked at Hollis critically, searching his face for signs which would tell of insincerity. Seeing none, he deliberately stretched a hand out to Hollis, his lips wreathing into an approving grin.

"Durned if you ain't the stuff!" he declared. "I'm just bettin' that Ten Spot ain't scarin' you none!" Then he backed out of the door and, still grinning, disappeared.

AFTER Jiggs had gone Hollis turned and smiled at Potter. "I suppose you know this man Ten Spot," he said. "Will he come?"

"He'll come," returned Potter. "Ten Spot is the worst of Dunlavey's set," he said; "a dangerous, reckless taker of human life. He is quick on the trigger and a dead shot. He is called Ten Spot because of the fact that once, with a gun in each hand, he shot all the spots from a ten of hearts at ten paces."

Hollis sat silent, thoughtfully stroking his chin. Potter smiled admiringly.

"I know that you don't like to run," he said; "you aren't that kind. But you haven't a chance with Ten Spot." Potter's hands shook as he tried to resume work at the type case. "I didn't think they would have nerve enough for that game. I rather thought they would try some other plan– something not quite so raw. But it seems they have nerve enough for anything. Hollis" he concluded dejectedly, "you've got to get out of town before six o'clock or Ten Spot will kill you!

"You've got plenty of time," he resumed as Hollis kept silent; "it's only a little after four. No one can blame you for not staying—everybody knows that you can't handle a gun fast enough to match Ten Spot. Maybe if you do light out and don't show up in town for a week or so this thing will blow over."

"Thank you very much for that advice, Potter," said Hollis slowly. "I appreciate the fact that you are thinking of my safety. But of course there is another side to the situation. You of course realize that if I run now I am through here—no one would ever take me seriously after it had been discovered that I had been run out of town by Ten Spot."

"That's a fact," admitted Potter. "But of course——"

"I think that's settled," interrupted Hollis. "You can't change the situation by argument. I've got to face it and face it alone. I've got to stay here until Ten Spot comes. If I can't beat him at his game he wins and you can telegraph East to my people." He rose and walked to the window, his back to the printer.

"You can knock off for today, Potter. Jump right on your pony and get out to Circle Bar. I wouldn't say anything to Norton or anyone until after nine tonight and then if I don't show up at the ranch you'll know that Ten Spot has got me."

He stood at the window while Potter slowly drew off his apron, carefully folded it and tucked it into a corner. He drew a deep breath of resignation and walked slowly to the back door, where his pony was hitched. He halted at the threshold, looking back at his chief.

"Good-bye," he said.

Hollis did not turn. "Good-bye," he answered.

Potter took one step outward, hesitated, and then again faced the front of the office.

"Damn it, Hollis," he said hoarsely, "don't wait for Ten Spot to start anything; when you see him coming in the door bore him. You've got a right to; that's the law in this country. When a man gives you notice to leave town you've got a right to shoot him on sight!"

For a moment he stood, awaiting an

answer. None came. Potter sighed and stepped out through the door, leaving his chief alone.

AT one minute to six Hollis pulled out his watch. He sighed, replaced the time-piece, and leaned back in his chair. A glance out through the window showed him that the street was deserted except for here and there a cow pony drooping over one of the hitching rails. The sun was coming slantwise over the roofs. Hollis looked at his watch again. It was one minute after six—and still there were no signs of Ten Spot.

A derisive grin appeared on Hollis's face. Perhaps Ten Spot had reconsidered.

And then there was a sudden movement and a man stood just inside the office door, a heavy revolver in his right hand, its muzzle menacing Hollis. The man was tall and angular, apparently about thirty years old, with thin, cruel lips and insolent, shifty eyes.

" 'Nds up!" he said sharply, swinging the revolver to a threatening poise. "It's six o'clock, you stinkin' tenderfoot coyote!"

Hollis's eyes flashed, but the man was several feet from him and out of reach. Hollis remained motionless in his chair, catching the man's gaze and holding it steadily with unwavering, narrowed eyes.

Though he had waited for the coming of Ten Spot, he had formulated no plan of action; he had felt that somehow he would come out of the clash with him without injury. He still thought so.

"I suppose you are Ten Spot?" he said slowly. He was surprised at the steadiness of his voice.

The man grinned, his eyes alert, shifty, filled with a chilling menace. "You got her right, tenderfoot," he said; " 'Ten Spot's' m' handle, an' if you're a-feelin' like criticizin' her do her some rapid before I start dealin' out the lead which is in my pritty."

Hollis smiled and carelessly twisted himself about in his chair until he was in a position to make a quick spring.

" 'Ten Spot' is a picturesque name," he remarked quietly, not removing his gaze from Ten Spot's eyes for the slightest fraction of a second; "I have no criticism to make. I've always made it a point to refrain from criticizing my visitors. At least I don't recollect ever having criticized a visitor who carried a gun," he concluded with a smile.

Ten Spot's lips curled sarcastically.

"Hell," he said truculently, "that there palaver makes me sick. I reckon you're too damn white livered to criticize a man that's lookin' at you. There ain't no lousy tenderfoot got nerve enough to criticize nothin'!"

Hollis slowly raised his hands and placed them on the arms of his chair, apparently to steady himself, but in reality to be ready to project himself out of the chair in case he could discern any indication of action on Ten Spot's part.

"Ten Spot," he said, "at four o'clock this afternoon I heard that you and Yuma Ed were framing up your present visit. I know what you have come for. You came to kill me. Is that correct?"

Ten Spot's eyes narrowed—into them had come an appraising, speculative glint. He nodded. "You got her right," he admitted gruffly. "But if you knowed why didn't you slope?" He looked at Hollis with a half sneer, as though unable to decide whether Hollis was a brave man or merely a fool.

Hollis saw the indecision in Ten Spot's eyes and his own brightened. At last he had planned a form of action and he coolly estimated the distance between himself and Ten Spot. While Hollis had been speaking Ten Spot had taken a step forward and he was now not over four or five feet distant. Into Ten Spot's eyes had come an amused, disdainful gleam; Hollis's quiet, argumentative attitude had disarmed him. This was exactly what Hollis had been waiting for.

TEN SPOT seemed almost to have forgotten his weapon; it had sagged, the muzzle pointing downward—the man's mind had become temporarily diverted from his purpose. When he saw Hollis move suddenly forward he remembered his gun and tried to swing its muzzle upward, but it was too late. Hollis had lunged forward, his left hand closing on Ten Spot's right wrist, his right fist reaching Ten Spot's jaw in a full, sweeping, crashing uppercut.

The would-be killer did not have even time enough to pull the trigger of his six-shooter. It fell from his hand and thudded dully to the floor as his knees doubled under him and he collapsed in an inert, motionless heap near the door.

With a grim smile on his face Hollis picked up Ten Spot's weapon and placed it on the desk. For an instant he stood at the window, looking out into the street.

Down near the Fashion he saw some men—Yuma Ed among them. No doubt they were waiting the sound of the pistol shot which would tell them that Ten Spot had disposed of Hollis. Hollis grinned widely—Yuma and his gang were due for a surprise. For perhaps a minute Hollis stood beside the desk, watching Ten Spot. Then when the latter's hands began to twitch and a trace of color appeared in his face, Hollis pulled out his own revolver and approached him, standing within a few feet of him and looking down at him.

Ten Spot stirred presently and then with an effort sat up and looked at his conqueror with a glance of puzzled wonderment. Seeing Hollis's weapon and his own on the desk, the light of past events seemed to filter into his bewildered brain. He grinned owlishly, felt his jaw and then bowed his head, a flush of shame overspreading his face.

"Herd-rode!" he said dismally. "Herd-rode, an' by a tenderfoot! Oh, Lordy!" He suddenly looked up at Hollis, his eyes flashing with rage and defiance.

"Damn your hide, why don't you shoot?" he demanded. He placed his hands, palm down, on the floor, preparatory to rising, but ceased his efforts when he heard Hollis's voice, coldly humorous:

"I'll shoot just the minute you get to your feet. I'm running things here now."

Ten Spot sagged back and looked up at him. "I reckon you are," he laughed. "You're shorely some she-wolf with them there claws of your'n. An' I done laffed at Dunlavey an' Yuma after you'd clawed them." His face sobered, his eyes suddenly filling with an expression of defiant resignation.

"I reckon when you're done triflin' with me you c'n start to pumpin' your lead," he said. "There ain't no use of prolongin' the agony." He looked steadily at Hollis, his eyes filling with decision as he again placed his hands besides him on the floor to rise.

"You c'n open the ball when you get damn good an' ready," he sneered, "but I'm gettin' up right now. I ain't goin' to die off my pins like a damn coyote!"

He rose quickly, plainly expecting to be shot down the moment he reached his feet. When he discovered that Hollis evidently intended to delay the fatal moment he stiffened, his lips twitching queerly.

"Ten Spot," said Hollis quietly, "you're not all bad. You've just been keeping the wrong company. Here!"

He turned abruptly to the desk and took up Ten Spot's weapon, holding it by the muzzle and presenting it to him. Ten Spot looked from the weapon to Hollis and back again, blank amazement pictured on his face. Then he reached out mechanically, taking the weapon.

"Chuck full of cattridges, too!" he exclaimed in amazement, as he examined the chambers. "Why, hell——" He crouched and deftly swung the six-shooter around, the butt in his hand, his finger resting on the trigger. In this position he looked at Hollis.

The latter had not moved, but his own weapon was in his right hand, its muzzle covering Ten Spot, and when the latter swung his weapon up Hollis smiled grimly at him.

"Using it?" he questioned.

For an instant it seemed that Ten Spot would. An exultant, designing expression came into his face. Then suddenly he snapped himself erect and with a single, dexterous movement holstered the weapon. Then his right hand came suddenly out toward Hollis.

"Shake!" he said. "By God, you're white!"

Hollis smiled as he returned the hearty handclasp.

"You're cert'nly plum grit," assured Ten Spot as he released Hollis's hand. But I reckon you're some damn fool too. How did you know that I wouldn't turn you into a colander when you give me back my gun?"

"I didn't know," smiled Hollis. "I just took a chance. You see," he added, "it was this way. I never intended to shoot you. That sort of thing isn't in my line. But I certainly wasn't going to allow you to shoot me." He smiled oddly. "So I watched my chance and slugged you. Then when I was certain that you weren't dangerous any more I had to face another problem. If I had turned you loose after taking your gun what would you have done?"

"I'd have gone out an' rustled another gun an' come back here an' salivated you."

"That's just what you would have done," smiled Hollis. "I intend to stay in this country, Ten Spot, and if I had turned you loose without an understanding you would

have shot me at the first opportunity. As is stands now you owe me——"

"As it stands now," interrupted Ten Spot, a queer expression on his face, "I'm done shootin' as far as you're concerned." He walked to the door, hesitated on the threshold and looked back. "Mister man," he said slowly, "mebbe you won't lick Big Bill in this here little mix-up, but I'm telling you that you're goin' to give him a damn good run for his money! So-long."

CHAPTER VIII

IT was after seven o'clock when Hollis mounted his pony in the rear of the *Kicker* office and rode out over the plains toward the Circle Bar. He was properly elated by the outcome of his affair with Ten Spot.

Hollis was compelled to make a long detour in order to strike the Circle Bar trail, and when at seven-thirty o'clock he rode down through a dry arroyo toward a little basin which he must cross to reach a ridge that had been his landmark during all his trips back and forth from Dry Bottom to the Circle Bar, dusk had fallen and the shadows of the oncoming night were settling somberly down over the plains.

He rode slowly forward; there was no reason for haste, for he had told Potter to say nothing about the reason of his delay in leaving Dry Bottom, and Potter would not expect him before nine o'clock.

Riding down through the little basin at the end of the arroyo Hollis yielded to a deep, stirring satisfaction over the excellent beginning he had made in his fight against Dunlavey and the interests behind him. Many times he smiled, thinking of the surprise his old friends in the East must have felt over the perusal of their copies of the *Kicker;* over the information that he—who had been something of a figure in Eastern newspaperdom—had become the owner and editor of a newspaper in a God-forsaken town in New Mexico, and that at the outset he was waging war against interests that ridiculed a judge of the United States Court.

When he reached the ridge toward which he had been riding for the greater part of an hour night had come. The day had been hot, but there had been a slight breeze. But just as he reached the ridge he became aware that the breeze had died down; that waves of hot, sultry air were rising from the sun-baked earth. Usually at this time of the night there were countless stars, and now as he looked up into the great, vast arc of sky he saw no stars at all except away down in the west in a big rift between some mountains. He pulled up his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, watching the sky.

Back toward Dry Bottom, and on the north and south, rose great, black thunder-heads with white crests, seeming like mountains with snow-capped peaks. Between the thunder-heads were other clouds, of grayish-white, fleecy, wind-whipped, weird shapes, riding on the wings of the Storm-Kings.

While he sat motionless in the saddle watching, a sudden gust of cold wind swirled up around him, dashed some fine, flint-like sand against his face and into his eyes, and then swept onward. He was blinded for an instant, and allowed the reins to drop on his pony's neck while he rubbed his eyes with his fingers. He sat thus through an ominous hush and then to his ears came a low, distant rumble.

He touched his pony lightly on the flanks with his spurs and headed it along the ridge, convinced that a storm was coming and suddenly realizing that he was many miles from shelter.

He had traveled only a little distance when clouds of sand and dust, wind-driven, enveloped him, blinding him again, stinging his face and hands and blotting out the landmarks upon which he depended to guide him to the Circle Bar. He could not see a foot of the trail and so he gave the pony the rein, trusting to its instinct.

The pony had negotiated the ridge; had slowly loped down its slope to a comparatively low and level stretch of country, and was traveling steadily forward, when Hollis noticed a change in the atmosphere. It had grown hot again—sultry. He urged the pony forward, hoping the calm would last until he had covered a goodly part of the distance to the Circle Bar. For a quarter of an hour he went on at a good pace. But he had scarcely reached the edge of a stretch of broken country—which he dreaded even in the daylight—when the storm was upon him.

IT did not come unheralded. A blinding flash of lightning illuminated miles of the surrounding country. Then there was

darkness again—blacker than before. Immediately there came a heavy crash as though the Storm-Kings, having marshalled their forces, had thrown them together in one, great, clashing onrush. And then, straight down, roaring and shrieking, came the deluge.

The wise little plains-pony halted, standing with drooping head, awaiting the end of the first fierce onslaught. It lasted long and when it had gone another silence, as ominous as the preceding one, followed. The rain ceased entirely and the pony again stepped forward, making his way slowly, for the trail was now slippery and hazardous.

For another quarter of an hour the pony floundered through the mud, around gigantic boulders, over slippery hummocks, across little gullies. Hollis was beginning to think that he might escape a bad wetting after all when the rain came again.

This time it seemed the Storm-Kings were in earnest. The rain came down in torrents; Hollis could feel it wetting him to the skin, cutting through his clothing in long, stinging, vicious slants.

It was slow work for the pony. After riding for another quarter of an hour Hollis saw, during another lightning flash, another of his landmarks, and realized that in the last quarter of an hour he had traveled a very short distance. The continuing flashes of lightning had helped the pony forward, but presently the lightning ceased and a dense blackness succeeded. The pony went forward at an uncertain pace; several times it halted and faced about, apparently undecided about the trail. After another half hour's travel and coming to a stretch of level country, the pony halted again, refusing to respond to Hollis's repeated urging to go forward without guidance. For a long time Hollis continued to urge the animal—he cajoled, threatened—but the pony would not budge. Hollis was forced to the uncomfortable realization that it had lost the trail.

For a long time he sat quietly in the saddle, trying in the dense darkness to determine upon direction, but he finally gave it up and with a sudden impulse took up the reins and pulled the pony to the left, determined to keep to the flat country as long as possible.

He traveled for what seemed several miles, the pony gingerly feeling its way, when suddenly it halted and refused to advance. Something was wrong. Hollis leaned forward, attempting to peer through the darkness ahead, but not succeeding. And now, as though having accomplished its design by causing Hollis to lose the trail, the lightning flashed again, illuminating the surrounding country for several miles.

Hollis had been peering ahead when the flash came and he drew a deep breath of horror and surprise. The pony had halted within a foot of the edge of a high cliff whose side dropped away sheer, as though cut with a knife. Down below, perhaps a hundred feet, was an immense basin, through which flowed a stream of water. To Hollis's right, was a long, high, narrow ridge. He recognized the ridge as the one on which he and Norton had ridden some six weeks before—on the day he had had the adventure with Ed Hazelton. Another flash of lightning showed him two cottonwood trees—the ones pointed out to him by Norton as marking Big Elk crossing—the dead line set by Dunlavey and his men.

Hollis knew his direction now and he pulled the pony around and headed it away from the edge of the cliff and toward the flat country which he knew led down through the canyon to Devil's Hollow, where he had taken leave of Ed and Nellie Hazelton. He was congratulating himself upon his narrow escape when a flash of lightning again illuminated the country and he saw, not over a hundred a feet distant, sitting motionless on their ponies, a half dozen cowboys. Also on his pony, slightly in advance of the others, a grin of derision on his face, was Dunlavey.

AT about the time that the storm had overtaken Hollis, Potter was unsaddling his pony at the Circle Bar corral gate. A little later he was on the wide lower gallery of the ranchhouse washing the stains of travel from his face and hands. At supper he was taciturn, his face deeply thoughtful. Had Ten Spot come? What had been the outcome of the meeting? These questions preyed on his mind and brought furrows into his face.

At supper he caught Norton watching him furtively and he flushed guiltily, for he felt that in spite of Hollis's order to say nothing to Norton he should have told. He had already informed Norton that Hollis intended remaining in Dry Bottom until a later hour than usual, but he had said

nothing about the intended visit of Ten Spot to the *Kicker* office.

After he finished his meal he drew a chair out upon the gallery and placing it in a corner from where he could see the Dry Bottom trail he seated himself in it and tried to combat the disquieting fears that oppressed him. When Norton came out and took a chair near him he tried to talk to the range boss upon some small subjects, but he could not hold his thoughts. He fell into long silences; his thoughts kept going back to Dry Bottom.

When the rain came he felt a little easier, for he had a hope that Hollis might have noticed the approach of the storm and decided to remain in town until it had passed. But after the rain had ceased his fears again returned. Norton had repeatedly referred to Hollis's absence, and each time Potter had assured him that Hollis would come soon. Shortly before nine o'clock, when the clouds lifted and the stars began to appear, Potter rose and paced the gallery floor. At nine, when it had become light enough to see quite a little distance down the Dry Bottom trail and there were still no signs of Hollis, he blurted out the story of the day's occurrences.

The information acted upon Norton like an electric shock. He was on his feet before Potter had finished speaking, grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him roughly.

"Why didn't you say something before?" he demanded. "Why did you leave him? Wasn't there somebody in Dry Bottom that you could have sent out here to tell me?" He cursed harshly. "Ten Spot's got him!" he declared sharply, his eyes glittering savagely. "He'd have been here by this time!" He was taking a hitch in his cartridge belt while talking, and before concluding he was down off the gallery floor and striding toward the corral.

"Tell my wife that I've gone to Dry Bottom," he called back to Potter. "Important business! I'll be back shortly after midnight!"

Leaving Potter on the porch staring after him he ran to the corral, roped his pony, threw on a saddle and bridle and mounted with the animal on a run.

The stars were shining brilliantly now and from the porch Potter could see Norton racing down the Dry Bottom trail with his pony in a furious gallop. For a time Potter watched him, then he disappeared and Potter went into the house to communicate his message to his wife.

The rain had been heavy while it lasted, but by the time Norton had begun his race to Dry Bottom very little evidence of it remained and the pony's flying hoofs found the sand of the trail almost as dry and hard as before the storm.

Norton spared the pony only on the rises and in something over an hour after the time he had left the Circle Bar he drew up in front of the *Kicker* office in Dry Bottom, dismounted, and bounded to the door. It was locked. He placed a shoulder against it and crashed it in, springing inside and lighting a match. He smiled grimly when he saw no signs of Hollis; when he saw that the interior was in an orderly condition and that there were no signs of a conflict. If Ten Spot had killed Hollis he had done the deed outside the *Kicker* office.

Norton came out again, pulling the wreck of the door after him and closing it as well as he could. Then, leaving his pony, he strode toward the Fashion saloon. As he came near he heard sounds of revelry issuing from the open door and he smiled coldly. A flashing glance through the window showed him that Ten Spot was there, standing at the bar. In the next instant Norton was inside, confronting Ten Spot, his big six-shooter out and shoved viciously against Ten Spot's stomach.

"What have you done with Hollis?" he demanded.

Several men who had been standing at the bar talking and laughing fell silent and looked at the two men, the barkeeper sidled closer, crouching warily, for he knew Norton.

TEN SPOT had spread his arms out on the bar and was leaning against it, looking at Norton in unfeigned bewilderment. He did not speak at once. Then suddenly aware of the foreboding, savage gleam in Norton's eyes, a glint of grim humor came into his own and he said sarcastically:

"I don't reckon to be anyone's keeper." He smiled widely, with a suddenly ludicrous expression. "If you're talkin' about that tenderfoot noospaper guy, he don't need no keeper."

"You went down there to shoot him!" Norton said. "Where is he?"

"Mebbe I did," returned Ten Spot. "Howsomever, I didn't shoot him. I ain't

tellin' how I come to change my mind—that's my business, an' you can't shoot it out of me. But I'm tellin' you this: me an' that guy has agreed to call it quits, an' if I hear any man talkin' extravagant about him, me an' that man's goin' to have a run in might sudden!" He laughed. "Someone's been funnin' you," he said. "When he handed me back my gun after sluggin'——"

But he was now talking to Norton's back, for the range boss was at the door, striding rapidly toward his pony. He mounted again and rode out on the trail, proceeding slowly, convinced that something had happened to Hollis after he had left Dry Bottom. It was more than likely that he had lost his way in the storm, and in that case he would probably arrive at the Circle Bar over some round-about trail. He was now certain that he had not been molested in town; if he had been some of the men in the Fashion would have told him about it. Hollis would probably be at the ranch by the time he arrived, to laugh at his fears. Nevertheless he rode slowly, watching the trail carefully.

The dawn was just showing above the horizon when he rode up to the ranchhouse to find Potter standing on the porch—apparently not having left there during his absence. Beside Potter stood Ed Hazelton, and near the latter a drooping pony, showing signs of hard riding.

Norton passed the corral gate and rode up to the two men. A glance at their faces told him that something had gone wrong. But before he could speak the question that had formed on his lips Hazelton spoke.

"They got him, Norton," he said slowly.

"Dead?" queried Norton sharply, his lips straightening.

"No," returned Hazelton gloomily; "he ain't dead. But when I found him he wasn't far from it. Herd-rode him, the damned sneaks! Beat him up so's his own mother wouldn't know him!"

"Wait!" commanded Norton. "I'm going with you. I suppose you've got him over to your shack?" He caught Hazelton's nod and issued an order to Potter. "Go down to the bunkhouse and get Weary out. Tell him to hit the breeze to Cimarron for the doctor. If the doc' don't want to come drag him by the ears!"

He spurred his pony furiously to the corral gate and in a short time had saddled another horse and was back where Hazelton was awaiting him. Without speaking a word to each other the two men rode rapidly down the Coyote trail, while Potter, following directions, his face haggard and drawn from loss of sleep and worry, hurried to the bunkhouse to arouse Weary and send him on his long journey to Cimarron.

CHAPTER IX

HOLLIS'S tall figure lay pitifully slack on a bed in the Hazelton cabin. Nellie Hazelton had given him what care she could out of her limited knowledge and now nothing more could be done until the arrival of the Cimarron doctor. Swathed in bandages, his clothing torn and soiled—as though after beating him his assailants had dragged him through the mud—one hand queerly twisted, his face swollen, his whole great body looking as though it had received the maximum of injury, Hollis moved restlessly on the bed, his head rolling oddly from side to side, incoherent words issuing from between his bruised and swollen lips.

Norton stood beside the bed, looking down at the injured man with a grim, savage pity.

"The damned cowards!" he said, his voice quivering. "There must have been a dozen of them—to do him up like that!"

"Seven," returned Ed Hazelton grimly. "They left their trail there; I counted the hoof prints." He looked at Norton with a frown. "We can't do anything here," he said shortly, "until the doctor comes. I'll take you down where I found him."

They went out and mounted their ponies. Down the trail a mile or so they came to a level that led away toward Rabbit-Ear Creek. From the level they could see the Circle Cross buildings, scattered over a small stretch of plain on the opposite side of the river. There was no life around them, no movement.

Hazelton halted his pony in some tall grass near a bare, sandy spot on the plains. The grass here grew only in patches and Norton could plainly see a number of hoof prints in the sand. One single set led away across the plains toward the Dry Bottom trail. Hazelton spoke quietly.

"That's Hollis's trail. He must have took the Dry Bottom trail an' lost it in the storm. He lost his way an' rode over here,

Well, he got this far—rode right up to the edge of the butte over there an' then come back this way. Then he met—well, the men that did it."

"They all stood there for a little while; you can see where their horses pawed. Then mebbe they started somethin', for you can see where Hollis's pony throwed up a lot of sand, tryin' to break out. The others were in a circle—you can see that. I've figured it out that Hollis saw there wasn't any chance for him against so many an' he tried to hit the breeze away from here. I'll show you."

They followed the hoof prints down the slope and saw that all the riders must have been traveling fast at this point, for the earth was cut and the hoof prints bunched fore and aft. They ran only a little way, however. About a hundred yards down the slop, in a stretch of bare, sandy soil, the horses had evidently come to a halt again, for they were bunched well together and there were many of them, showing that there had been some movement after the halt.

Norton dismounted and examined the surrounding soil.

"They all got off here," he said shortly, after the examination; "there's the prints of their boots. They caught him here and handed it to him."

Hazelton silently pointed to a queer track in the sand—a shallow groove running about fifty feet, looking as though some heavy object had been drawn over it. Norton's face whitened.

"Drug him!" he said grimly, his lips in two straight lines. "It's likely they roped him!" He remounted his pony and sat in the saddle, watching Hazelton as the latter continued his examination. "They're a fine, nervy bunch!" he sneered as Hazelton also climbed into his saddle. "They must have piled onto him like a pack of wolves."

They rode away down the trail toward the cabin. Norton went in and looked again at Hollis, and then, telling Hazelton that he would return in the afternoon, he departed for the Circle Bar. He stopped at the ranchhouse and communicated the news to his wife and Potter and then rode on up the river to a point about ten miles from the ranchhouse—where the outfit was working.

The men received his news with expressions of rage and vengeance. They had come to admire Hollis for his courage in electing to continue the fight against Dunlavey. Yet none of them expressed sympathy, though their faces showed that they felt it. Expressions of sympathy in a case such as this would have been unnecessary and futile. But their expressions of rage showed how the news had affected them. Though they knew that Dunlavey's forces outnumbered their own they were for striking back immediately. But Norton discouraged this.

"We're layin' low for a while," he said. "Mebbe the boss will get well. If he does he'll make things mighty interestin' for Dunlavey. If he dies——" His eyes flashed savagely. "Well, if he dies you boys can go as far as you like an' I'll go with you without doin' any kickin'."

"What's goin' to be done with that noospaper of his'n?" inquired Ace. "You reckon she'll miss fire till he's well again?"

NORTON'S brows wrinkled; he had not thought of the newspaper. But he realized now that if the paper failed to appear on scheduled time the people in Union County would think that Hollis had surrendered; they would refuse to believe that he had been so badly injured that he could not issue the paper, and Dunlavey would be careful to circulate some sort of a story to encourage this view. Norton's eyes flashed with a sudden determination.

"I don't reckon that the *Kicker* will miss fire," he declared; "not if I have to go to Dry Bottom an' get her out myself!"

Late in the afternoon Norton again visited the Hazelton cabin. He found the Cimarron doctor already there. Hollis was still unconscious, though resting easier. The doctor declared that he would remain with him throughout the night. He followed Norton out on to the porch and told him that at present he could not tell just how serious Hollis's injuries were. There was a great wound in his head which he feared might turn out seriously, but if not, Hollis would recover quickly and be as good as ever within a few weeks—except for his left wrist—which was broken. He praised Nellie Hazelton for the care she was giving the injured man. Convinced that there was nothing more to be done, Norton returned to the Circle Bar to give his attention to his work.

CHAPTER X

THE Cimarron doctor's fears for the wound on Hollis's head had proved unfounded and on the tenth day after his experience on the night of the storm, Hollis was sitting on the Hazelton porch, his head still swathed in bandages, his left wrist in a splint, but his spirit still untouched. The marks on his face had all disappeared, except an ugly gash under his right eye—which still showed a slight discoloration—and a smaller cut on the chin. The Cimarron doctor had told him that the wound under his eye would leave a permanent scar—the wound had been deep and in spite of the doctor's care, had drawn together queerly, affecting the eye itself and giving it an odd expression. Many times since becoming able to move about had Hollis looked at his face in his mirror, and each time there had come into his eyes an expression that boded ill for the men who had been concerned in the attack on him.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun was coming slant-wise over the roof of the cabin, creating a welcome shade on the porch. Ed Hazelton had been gone since morning, looking after his cattle, and Nellie was in the house, busily at work in the kitchen.

Norton had left the cabin an hour before and a little later Potter had stopped in on his way over to Dry Bottom to set up an article that he had written at Hollis's dictation. Hollis had told Norton of his experiences on the night of the storm.

After the flash of lightning had revealed Dunlavey and his men, Hollis had attempted to escape, knowing that Dunlavey's intentions could not be peaceable, and that he would have no chance in a fight with several men. He had urged his pony toward the two buttes that he had seen during the lightning flash, making a circuit in order to evade his enemies. He might have succeeded, but unfortunately the darkness had lifted and they had been able to intercept him. He could give no clear account of what had happened after they had surrounded him. There had been no words spoken. He had tried to break out of the circle; had almost succeeded when a loop settled over his shoulders and he was dragged from his pony—dragged quite a distance.

The fall had hurt him, but when the rope had slackened he had regained his feet—to see that all the men had surrounded him. One man struck at him and he had immediately struck back, knocking the man down. After that the blows came thick and fast. He hit several more faces that were close to him and at one time was certain he had put three of his assailants out of the fight. But the others had crowded him close. He fought them as well as he could with the great odds against him, and once was inspired with a hope that he might escape. Then had come a heavy blow on the head—he thought that one of the men had used the butt of a revolver. He could dimly remember receiving a number of other blows and then he knew nothing more until he had awakened in the Hazelton cabin.

Hollis's opinion of Dunlavey's motive in thus attacking him coincided with Norton's. They might easily have killed him. That they did not showed that they must have some peculiar motive. Aside from a perfectly natural desire on Dunlavey's part to deal to Hollis the same sort of punishment that Hollis had inflicted on Dunlavey on the occasion of their first meeting, the latter could have no motive other than that of preventing the appearance of the *Kicker* on its regular publication day.

Hollis was convinced that Dunlavey had been inspired by both motives. But though Dunlavey had secured his revenge for the blow that Hollis had struck him in Dry Bottom, Hollis did not purpose to allow him to prevent the appearance of the *Kicker*. It had been impossible for him to make the trip to Dry Bottom, but he had summoned Potter and had dictated considerable copy, Potter had written some, and in this manner they had managed to get the *Kicker* out twice.

Perhaps there were some persons in Union County who, acquainted with the details of the attack on Hollis, expected to read an account of it in the *Kicker*. If there were any such they were disappointed. There was nothing about the attack printed in the *Kicker*—nor did Hollis talk to any stranger concerning it.

HOLLIS'S return to the Circle Bar was unostentatious and quite in keeping with his method of doing things. Within the next few days he met several of the Circle Bar men and there were mutterings

against Dunlavey, but Hollis discouraged action, assuring the mutterers that his differences with Dunlavey were entirely personal and that he intended carrying on the fight alone.

His wounds mended rapidly, and within two weeks—except for the broken wrist—he was well as ever. Meanwhile Potter had succeeded in getting the *Kicker* out on time.

Nothing had been heard of Dunlavey—it seemed that after the attack upon Hollis he had withdrawn from the scene to await the latter's next move.

But Hollis was in no hurry; he had lost some of the enthusiasm that had marked his attitude in the beginning, but this enthusiasm had been replaced by determination. He was beginning to realize that in Dunlavey he had met a foe worthy of his most serious efforts. He had determined that there would be no repetition of the attack upon him, and therefore during his convalescence he had sent to Las Vegas for a repeating rifle, and this he carried with him on his trips to and from Dry Bottom.

Meanwhile the drought continued. The sky was cloudless, the desultory breezes that swept the plains blighted growing things, raising little whirlwinds of fine, flinty alkali dust and spreading it over the face of the world. The storm that had caught Hollis on the Dry Bottom trail had covered only a comparatively small area; it had lasted only a brief time and after its passage the country was dry as before.

Rabbit-Ear Creek of all the streams in the vicinity of Dry Bottom held water. From all points of the compass cattle drifted to the Rabbit-Ear, slaking their thirst and refusing to leave. Bronzed riders on drooping ponies trailed them, cutting them out, trying to keep their herds intact, but not succeeding. Confusion reigned. For miles in both directions Rabbit-Ear Creek became one huge, long watering trough.

Only the small cattle owners suffered because of the drought. Riders told of the presence of plenty of water in the Canadian, the Cimarron, and the Ute. In fact, nearly all the streams held by the large ranchers seemed to contain plenty. The smaller owners had apparently been selected by Providence for ruin.

There were mutterings against the large owners, against Providence. Particularly were there mutterings against Dunlavey when word came to the owners of the herds that if the drought was not broken within the next ten days the Circle Cross manager would drive all foreign cattle from the Rabbit-Ear. He would not allow his own herds to suffer to save theirs, he said.

On the night following the day upon which the small owners had received this word from Dunlavey a number of the former waited upon Hollis. They found him seated on the lower gallery of the ranchhouse talking to Norton and Potter. Lemuel Train, of the Pig-pen outfit, had been selected as their spokesman. He stood before Hollis, a big man, surrounded by his fellow ranchers, bronzed, bearded, serious of face. Though the sun had been down three hours the heat was frightful and the visitors shuffled their feet and uncomfortably wiped the perspiration from their brows.

"Sit down," invited Hollis. He rose and stood while the men draped themselves on the edge of the gallery floor—all except the spokesman, Lemuel Train. The latter faced Hollis. His face was grim in the dusk.

"We've come to see what you've got to say about water," he said.

Days before Norton had told Hollis that these men who were now herding at the Rabbit-Ear were the small ranchers who had refused to aid the elder Hollis in his fight against Dunlavey some years before. Therefore Hollis did not answer at once. When he did his voice was dry and cold. He too had heard of Dunlavey's ultimatum concerning the water.

"Before I say anything on that subject I should like to know to whom I am talking," he said.

Train swept a ponderous hand toward his fellow visitors, pointing them out in turn. "There's Truxton, of the Diamond Dot; Holcomb, of the Star; Henningson, of the Three Bar; Yeager, of the Three Diamond; an' Clark, of the Circle Y."

"Correct," affirmed Norton, behind Hollis.

"I am Kent Hollis," he said to the men; "I suppose you know that."

"I reckon we know you," said Train; "you're Jim Hollis's boy."

"Then you know that Dunlavey and my father were not exactly friends," returned Hollis.

Several heads bobbed affirmatively; others sat grimly silent. Hollis smiled.

"How many of you offered to help my father when he came to you asking for assistance in his fight against Dunlavey?"

Train fidgeted. "I reckon they wasn't much chance—" he began, and then hesitated, looking around at his fellows.

"Of course," returned Hollis quietly, after an embarrassed pause, "there wasn't much chance for you to win then. And you had to take a big risk to help my father. But he had to take a bigger risk to fight alone. Still he fought. And he fought alone. And now you men have come to Jim Hollis's son to help you. Do you think he ought?"

The men sat silent; the spokesman was without words.

"How many men can the six of you muster—in case Dunlavey should try to carry out his decision to drive your cattle from the Rabbit-Ear—or shoot them?"

"Eighteen, I reckon," returned Train, looking at the others, who nodded affirmatively to his question.

HOLLIS turned to Norton. "How many men does Dunlavey employ?" he questioned.

"Thirty," snapped Norton. "But in case he needed them he c'n get a hundred."

"Big odds," smiled Hollis. "Why should I volunteer to help you fight Dunlavey. My cattle are certain of getting enough water. Why shouldn't I be selfish, as you men were when my father went to you for assistance?"

There was no answer. The faces that surrounded Hollis in the semi-darkness showed plainly that their owners had given up thoughts of assistance. Grim, hard lines came into them; two or three sneered. Of course they would fight Dunlavey; there was no alternative, for they could not stand idly by and see their cattle slain—Dunlavey could not drive them from water, they would have to be shot.

All of the men knew this. Yet they did not answer Hollis's question. They had not come to plead with him; they knew that the situation had narrowed down to a point where they could depend only on their own resources. They would not plead, yet as they silently started to file off the gallery there were bitter smiles on several of their faces.

Lemuel Train was the last man down the gallery. He turned as he reached the ground and looked back over his shoulder at Hollis.

"So-long," he said shortly. "I reckon you're even now."

Hollis had not moved. "Wait, Train!" he said. The visitors halted and faced him.

"Men," he said quietly, "you have not answered my question. I'm going to repeat it: Why should I not be selfish, as you men were when my father went to you for assistance?"

Lemuel Train smiled ironically. "Why, I reckon it's your trick," he said; "you've got all the cards."

"Come back here, men," said Hollis. "Since none of you care to answer my question I'll answer it myself." He stood silent while the men filed back and resumed seats on the gallery edge.

Hollis knew that he might readily become melodramatic in the few words that he purposed to say to the men, and so when he began talking he adopted a low, even tone, confidential, serious. He told them that the things he had written in his salutatory in the *Kicker,* months before, had been an honest declaration of the principles in which he believed. He purposed to fight, if necessary, to retain his rights.

He told them that he held no ill-feeling against them on account of their refusal to assist his father. That was past history. But now they were to look into the future; they were all facing ruin if they did not combine in a common cause. So far as he was concerned their cattle might remain at the Rabbit-Ear until the drought ended, or until the stream went dry. And if Dunlavey fought them—well, he would be with them to the finish.

When he had concluded Lemuel Train stepped forward and shook his hand. The others followed. There was no word spoken. The men filed down from the gallery, sought their horses, mounted, and rode slowly away into the darkness. When they had gone Hollis turned to resume his chair, but found Norton standing near him, looking at him with a curious smile.

"Shake!" said the latter. "I knowed you'd do it that way!"

CHAPTER XI

HOLLIS alone, of all the men whose cattle grazed on the Circle Bar side of the Rabbit-Ear, really doubted that Dunlavey would have the courage to

inaugurate a war against the small owners. Lemuel Train was particularly strong in his belief that Dunlavey would not hesitate to shoot whatever cattle infringed on what he considered were his rights. "I know the skunk!" he declared heatedly to Hollis a day or two after the conversation on the porch at the Circle Bar. "He'll do it. I'm only scared that he won't wait till the tenth day before beginnin'. Why in hell don't it rain?"

This remained the great, universal question. But at the end of a week it was unanswered. The sun swam in its endless circles, a great ball of molten silver at which no man could look with the naked eye, traveling its slow way through a blurred, white sky, sinking to the horizon in the evening and leaving a scorched, blasted, gasping country behind. The nights brought no relief.

Hollis's daily twenty mile ride from the Circle Bar to Dry Bottom and return became a trial to him. At night, when he returned from the trip, hot, dry, dusty, he would draw a chair out on the gallery floor and scan the sky for signs of rain. To his recollection since his adventure on the night of the storm there had not been a cloud in the sky. On the trails the dust was inches deep and light as a feather. It rose in stifling whirlwinds, filling the nostrils and the lungs, parching the tongues of man and beast and accentuating the suffering caused by lack of water.

All the pleasure had been drawn from Hollis's rides because of the dryness and heat. On a morning a week following the day upon which Dunlavey had issued his warning to the cattle owners, Hollis made his usual trip to Dry Bottom. Norton accompanied him, intending to make some purchases in town. They rode the ten miles without incident and Hollis left Norton at the door of the *Kicker* office, after telling the range boss to come back to the office when he had made his purchases as he intended returning to the Circle Bar before noon. Hollis found Potter inside. The latter had remained in Dry Bottom over night and was busy at a type case when his chief entered. Hollis did not remain long in the office. He looked over some letters that Potter had placed on his desk, placed one in a pocket and rose, telling Potter that he would be back and instructing him to tell Norton to await his coming should the latter return before him. Then he went down to the court house.

He found the door of Judge Graney's court room slightly ajar and without knocking he pushed it open and entered. On the threshold he halted and drew a deep breath. Judge Graney was seated at his desk, and directly opposite him, his face inflamed with anger, sat Dunlavey. Near a window at the side of the room stood a grave faced man of medium height, slender and muscular, who was watching the Judge and Dunlavey soberly.

At Hollis's sudden appearance the Judge looked up and smiled, while Dunlavey faced around, a derisive, mocking grin on his face. Hollis bore no marks of the recent attack beyond the left wrist, still in splints, and the scar under his eye.

"Come in," invited Judge Graney. "I think, since you are responsible for the startling innovation which we have been discussing, that you are entitled to a word."

He gravely waved Hollis to a chair.

"Perhaps you will remember that some time ago you printed an article in the *Kicker* urging upon the Government the necessity of bringing the law into Union County?" he continued.

Hollis nodded. "Yes," he said quietly; "I remember."

"Well," resumed the Judge, "the article has borne fruit. But perhaps not in the manner you expected." He laughed around at the three. "Law, you know, is an expensive institution. A community that desires the law must pay, and pay dearly—for it. In short, if it wants the law it must pay taxes.

"At all events I have received word from the Interior Department that if we want the law to come out here we must pay for it. The inference, if we are to consider the instructions of the Secretary of the Interior, are: 'I am informed that several large ranch owners in Union County are inclined to evade taxation. Especially is this true —I am told—of a man named Dunlavey, who, if the report is correct, paid, during the last half year, taxes on five hundred head of cattle, whereas it is claimed that his holdings will amount to about five thousand, yearly average. In view of this ridiculously low return it seems incumbent upon me to appoint an inquisitor, whose duty—' "

DUNLAVEY laughed harshly, interrupting the Judge. Then he turned suddenly to Hollis, his face inflamed with passion.

"I reckon this is some of your work?" he snarled.

Hollis met his gaze steadily. "I imagine it is," he said quietly. "Nothing could please me better than to discover that I had a hand in bringing the law to this country."

Judge Graney cleared his throat. "This does not apply to you alone, Dunlavey," he said, facing the latter. "Letters have been sent to every cattleman in Union County, demanding their appearance before me. Beginning on the first of next month,—September—which will be the day after to-morrow, every cattle owner in the county will be required to register his brand and return a list of his cattle, for taxation. Any owner refusing to make a fair return on his stock will make a grave mistake. Upon his failure to make such return the government will seize his stock and dispose of it to the highest bidder, deducting such an amount as will cover taxes, court costs, and fines, and returning the remainder, if any, to the owner." Judge Graney faced Hollis. "I suppose you have received your notification to that effect?" he inquired.

"I haven't paid much attention to my mail since—since I met Mr. Dunlavey and several of his friends one night—some weeks ago." He smiled grimly, at Dunlavey. "I haven't been very much interested in anything except getting well," continued Hollis. "But whether I have been notified or not I shall take pleasure in complying with the law. I shall have my list ready on time—likewise I shall register my brand."

Dunlavey sneered. "That won't be such an almighty big job—counting your steers," he said.

Hollis laughed shortly. "Perhaps not as big a job as it would have been had conditions been different," he observed dryly.

"Meaning?" snapped Dunlavey, stiffening in his chair.

"You know what I mean," snapped Hollis.

For an instant it seemed that Dunlavey contemplated attacking Hollis; he placed both hands on the desk before him, preparatory to rising, evidently thought better of the idea and sank into the chair again, his eyes flashing venomously as they met Hollis's.

"This country's going plum to hell!" he sneered; "when tenderfeet and half-baked lawyers get to running things it will be time for the cattlemen to pull up stakes and hit the breeze! But I'm telling you one thing!" He banged his fist heavily down upon the desk and scowled at the Judge, "You let your damned tenderfoot owners bring in their lists. Mebbe they don't know any better. But I ain't bringin' in no list. It's one thing to pass a law and another thing to enforce it!" He sat silent for an instant, glaring at the Judge, then he turned to Hollis.

"You've been carrying on like you was intending to own this here country some day," he sneered; "with your damned newspaper and your lawyer friend here. What we handed you the other night was just a sample of what you'll get if you don't hit the breeze out of this country!" He got to his feet and stood beside the desk, glaring around at the three men.

For a moment neither of the three spoke. There was a saturnine, almost mocking, smile on the face of the man who stood at the window. In his expression one could discover much appreciation of the character of the man at whom he was looking—it revealed the fact that he had met such men before—and admired them little. There was no fear in the expression, yet had one of the other men taken the trouble to look at him they would have seen that his right hand was now lingering very close to the butt of the revolver at his hip.

Hollis's face was slightly pale. He walked to within five feet of Dunlavey and stood quietly beside the desk looking at him.

"Dunlavey," he began slowly, "I haven't anything to do with enforcing the law that seems to have come to Union County. You can defy the law if you please. But I have something to say in reply to what you have said to me. It's this: I haven't any ambition to own the entire country—such talk from a grown man is childish. But I do intend to own the little I've got in spite of you or anyone else. And I'm not in the least afraid of you. I owe you something on account of the other night and some day I'm going to thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Dunlavey's hand fell suggestively to his

side. "There's no time like the present," he sneered.

"Of course I know that you carry a gun," said Hollis. "Most of you folks out here don't seem to be able to get along without one. And every man that carries one seems to yearn to use it. But it has always seemed to me that a man who will use a gun without great provocation is a coward!" He smiled grimly into Dunlavey's face.

For an instant Dunlavey did not move. His eyes glittered malevolently as they bored into Hollis's. Then his expression changed until it was a mingling of contempt, incredulity, and mockery.

"So you're thinking of thrashing me?" he sniffed, backing away a little and eyeing Hollis critically. "You slugged me once and you're thinking to do it again. And you think that any man who uses a gun on another is a coward?" He laughed sardonically. "Well, all I've got to say to you is that you ain't got your eye-teeth cut yet." He deliberately turned his back on Hollis and the others and walked to the door. On the threshold he halted, looking back at them with a sneering smile.

"You know where I live," he said to Judge Graney. "I ain't bringing in no list nor I ain't registering my brand. I don't allow no man to come monkeying around on my range and if you come out there, thinking to run off any of my stock, you're doing it at your own risk!" His gaze went from the Judge to Hollis and his smile grew malignant.

"I'm saying this to you," he said, "no man ain't ever thrashed Bill Dunlavey yet and I ain't allowing that any man is ever going to. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

He slammed the door and was gone. Hollis turned from the door to see a dry smile on the face of the man at the window.

"Fire eater, ain't he?" observed the latter, as he caught Hollis's glance.

HOLLIS smiled. The Judge got to his feet and approached the two men.

"Hollis," he said, "shake hands with Mr. Allen, of Lazette."

Allen's hand came out quickly and was grasped by Hollis's, both grips being hearty and warm.

"My name's Ben Allen," explained the stranger with a smile. "Tacking on a handle like 'Mister' would sure make me feel like a stranger to myself."

"We'll not quarrel about that," remarked the Judge with a smile; "we'll call you Ben." He looked soberly at Hollis, continuing:

"Allen has been sent over here from Lazette to assist us in establishing the law. He was formerly sheriff of Colfax County. He is an old acquaintance of the new Secretary of the Interior and much trusted by him. He is to be the inquisitor mentioned in the letter which I read in the presence of Dunlavey."

Hollis looked at Allen with a new interest.

"I think we need you," he said simply. "But I imagine you will have to concentrate your efforts upon one ranch only—the Circle Cross. If you make Dunlavey bow to the law you may consider your work finished."

"I think Dunlavey will change his views of things shortly," remarked Allen, quietly. He smiled at Hollis. "I have read your paper regularly," he said. "You've got the editor of our paper hopping mad—with your claims about Dry Bottom being superior to Lazette. Also, you've stirred up the Secretary of the Interior some. I was called to Washington three weeks ago and invited to tell what I knew of conditions out here. I didn't exaggerate when I told the Secretary that hell was a more peaceful place for a law loving man to live in.

"The Secretary asked me if I knowed you and I told him that I didn't but I'd be right glad to. He told me to get you to one side and tell you to go to it." He smiled dryly. "According to what I've read in the *Kicker* you don't need to be told that."

He dropped his humor and spoke seriously, questioning Hollis about the location of his ranch, listening quietly and attentively to the latter's answers. Half an hour later after having arranged with Judge Graney for the registering of his brand and the listing of his cattle, Hollis left the court house and went to his office. In running through his mail he came upon Judge Graney's notification and also another letter, postmarked "Chicago," which drew a pleased smile to his face. A few minutes later Norton came in, and though Hollis had done very little on the paper he rose and smilingly announced his intention of returning to the Circle Bar.

"We'll take the Coyote trail," he informed Norton, after they had mounted and were riding away from the *Kicker* office; "I'm stopping for a moment at the Hazelton cabin. Of course," he added, seeing a knowing grin on Norton's face, "I expected you would be suspicious, but it's not what you think."

WHEN they came in sight of the Hazelton cabin Norton reined in his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, grinning at Hollis.

"You run along now," he advised. "I'll be hittin' her off toward the Dry Bottom trail for the rest of the way—I sorta like that trail better anyway."

He urged his pony off at a tangent and Hollis continued on his way. He found Nellie and Ed at home. Nellie came out on the porch, hearing his pony's hoofs on the hard sand and rocks of the trail, and there was a sincere welcome in her eyes. It was the first time that he had visited the cabin since he had returned to the Circle Bar.

Hollis stayed for dinner. Nellie was radiantly silent during the meal, attending to the wants of the two men, listening while they discussed recent happenings in the county. Ed was much pleased to hear of the coming of Ben Allen.

"That guy is business—through and through," he assured Hollis. "He was the best sheriff Colfax County ever had—and it's had some good ones. Allen's quiet, but there ain't anyone going to herdride him. Some have tried it, but they found it didn't pay and so they don't try it any more."

After dinner they went out on the porch for a smoke, leaving Nellie inside. They could hear her singing as she washed the dishes. Hazelton smiled as a particularly happy note reached his ears. "I don't know what's got into Sis," he said, flashing a swift glance at Hollis. "I don't know as I ever heard her sing that well before."

Hollis made no reply and the conversation turned to the drought—as all conversations did during that period. Word had come to Hazelton of Dunlavey's warning to the cattle owners. He had heard also of Hollis's announced intention of taking sides with the small owners.

"Dunlavey's ten days is up the day after to-morrow," said Hazelton. "If Dunlavey starts anything what are you going to do?"

"That will depend on what Dunlavey starts," smiled Hollis.

"H'm!" inexpressively grunted Hazelton. He flashed a glance at the face of the young man beside him. "I suppose you know who you're going to give your water to?" he questioned.

Hollis nodded. "To men who refused to help my father when he needed help," he returned.

Hazelton smiled oddly. "I've heard about that," he said. He laughed. "It strikes me that I wouldn't give such men any water," he added.

Hollis turned and looked at him, meeting his gaze fairly, and holding it.

"Yes, you would, Hazelton," he said, a broad smile on his face.

"How do you know that?" queried the latter, slightly defiant.

Hollis motioned toward the kitchen door. "I know," he said; "you're her brother."

"Well," began Hazelton hesitatingly—"I——"

The screen door opened—slammed, and Nellie Hazelton came out upon the porch.

For a long time Hollis sat, watching her, seeing a picture that smote his heart with a sudden longing. Then he thought of the letter in his pocket, the one post-marked "Chicago," which he had discovered at the *Kicker* office on returning from the court house. He drew it from his pocket and read the legend in the upper left hand corner:

"Dr. J. J. Hammond,
Overlook Hospital,
Chicago, Ill."

He studied the legend for some little time, his thoughts busy with the contents of the envelope. Fortunately, his letter to the great physician had fallen into the hands of the son, Tom Hammond, and the latter, not forgetting his old schoolmate, had appealed to his father. This was what the surgeon had written in the letter—he would not have agreed to accept the case had it not been for the fact that Hollis had been, and was Tom's friend. He would be pleased if the patient would make the journey to Chicago within a month, that he might be able to take up his case.

Hollis had been reading the letter again. He finished it and looked up, to see Ed and Nellie watching him. He flushed and smiled, holding out the letter to Nellie.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I found

this interesting. Perhaps you will also find it so."

He leaned back with a smile and watched them. But he did not watch long. He saw Nellie start, saw the color slowly recede from her face, saw her hands clench tightly —as she began to read the letter. He turned away, not caring to watch them during that sacred moment in which they would read the line of hope that the great surgeon had written. He looked—it seemed—for a long time down the Coyote trail, and when he finally turned his head toward them he saw Ed Hazelton sitting erect in his chair, apparently stunned by the news. But before him, close to him, so close that he felt her breath in his face—her eyes wide with delight, thankfulness—and perhaps something more—Nellie was kneeling.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hollis!" she said earnestly, her lips all a-quiver; "Thank you, and God bless you!"

HE tried to sit erect; tried to open his lips to tell her that he had done only what any man would have done under the circumstances. But he moved not, nor did he speak, for her arms had gone around his shoulders, and her lips were suddenly pressed firmly and quickly to him. Then he was released and she turned, crying:

"Come and thank him, Ed!"

But Ed had taken himself off—perhaps he did not care to allow anyone to witness his joy.

Some time during the evening Hollis took his departure from the Hazelton cabin. Ed had come back, silently taking Hollis's hand and gripping it earnestly. And before Hollis had departed Ed had taken himself into the house. Perhaps he divined that there were other's joys beside his.

That night before retiring Nellie stole softly into her brother's room and kissed him lightly on the forehead. That same night also Hollis rode up to the Circle Bar corral gate—singing. Norton and Potter were sitting on the gallery, waiting for him. While Hollis was removing the saddle from his pony Norton rose from his chair and smiled at Potter.

"Well," he said, "I'm goin' to bed." He moved a few steps toward the door and then turned and looked back at Potter, who had also risen. He laughed, and hummed softly,

"In the Spring, a young man's fancy lightly turns to love——"

CHAPTER XII

THE following day Hollis rode to town over the Dry Bottom trail. Had he followed a perfectly natural inclination he would have taken the Coyote, for it would have brought him to the Hazelton cabin. But he succeeded in forcing himself to go the other way, arguing that Nellie and her brother might wish to be alone to consider the great good fortune that had come upon them.

And so they did, though had Hollis appeared to them this morning as they sat upon the porch he would have been assured of a royal welcome.

The dawn found Nellie kneeling beside her brother's bed.

"Ed!" she said, leaning over him, waking him, her eyes alight with joy; "Ed, he says you can be cured!"

He struggled and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Gosh, sis!" he said in an awed voice. "Then it's true! I was afraid I'd been dreaming!"

"It's no dream," she returned ecstatically; "it's reality—beautiful reality! Wasn't it simply *great* of him to take such an interest in us?"

"Us?" grinned Ed, noting her crimson, happy face. "Well, mebbe he did it for *us,*" he added subtly, "but I take it I've got a right to have another opinion on that."

She fled from him without answering and a little later he heard her singing as she prepared breakfast. After the meal Ed made a short trip out into the basin to look after his cattle and then returned to the cabin. Sitting on the porch he and Nellie devoted several hours to a grave discussion of the situation. They discovered that it had a serious side.

In the first place there was the dangerous nature of the operation. Here Ed laughed away his sister's fears by assuring her that he was too tough to kill. If Nellie entertained any doubts she wisely remained silent, though Ed could see that she was not entirely reassured. He swept away her last objection to this forbidding feature when he told her that he preferred taking the risk to living in constant dread of a recurrence of an acute attack of his malady —such as he had experienced when he had attacked Hollis in Devil's Hollow.

There were many other things to be discussed—chiefly the care of the cattle and

the cabin during his absence in Chicago. He would not listen to her suggestion to accompany him—he would prefer to have her remain at the cabin. Or he would try to arrange with Hollis for her to stay at the Circle Bar. There she would have Mrs. Norton for a companion. He was certain that Hollis would arrange to have his men care for the cattle. He assured her that he would settle that question with Hollis when the latter passed the cabin that night on his return to the Circle Bar. Of course Hollis would take the Coyote trail to-night, he insinuated, grinning hugely at the blushes that reached her face.

But Hollis did not pass the cabin that night. He had taken the Dry Bottom trail on his return to the Circle Bar.

He had accomplished very little that day on account of the heat—and a certain vision that had troubled him—taking his mind off his work and projecting it to a little cabin in a small basin, to a porch where sat a girl—the girl of his vision. She had voluntarily kissed him. Had it been all on account of gratitude? Of course—though—— Well, memory of the kiss still lingered.

There had been one interesting development in Dry Bottom during the day. All day the town had swarmed with ranch owners who had come into the court house to list their cattle for taxation and register their brands. Shortly after noon Ben Allen had dropped into the *Kicker* office with the news that every owner in the county with the exception of Dunlavey had responded to the law's demands.

To Hollis's inquiry regarding the course he would pursue in forcing Dunlavey to comply with the law, Allen remarked with a smile that there was "plenty of time." He had had much experience with men of the Dunlavey type.

Potter and Hollis exchanged few words during the ride to the Circle Bar. The heat—the eternal, scorching, blighting heat—still continued; the dust had become an almost unbearable irritation. During the trip to the ranch the two men came upon an arroyo over which Hollis had passed many times. At a water hole where he had often watered his horse they came upon several dead steers stretched prone in the green slime. The water had disappeared; the spring that had provided it had dried. The steers were gaunt, lanky creatures, their hides stretched tight as drum-heads over their ribs, their tongues lolling out, black and swollen, telling mutely of their long search for water and their suffering.

A FEW miles farther on they came upon one of the punchers from the Circle Y with a calf thrown over the saddle in front of him. He was driving several gaunt, drooping cattle toward the Rabbit-Ear. The calf bellowed piteously at sight of Hollis and Potter. The puncher hailed them.

"You're Hollis, of the Circle Bar, ain't you?" he said when the latter had spurred his pony close to him. At Hollis's nod he grinned ironically. "Hot!" he said, coming quickly to the universal topic of conversation; "I reckon this wouldn't be called hot in some places—in hell, for instance. Say," he said, "to-morrow the ten days is up. Mebbe it'll be hotter then. The damned skunk!"

Of course he referred to Dunlavey.

Hollis was still of the opinion that Dunlavey would not attempt to carry out his threat. He smiled at the malevolent expression in the puncher's eyes.

"Somehow," he said quietly, "I think that Dunlavey has been bluffing. I don't think he'll be fool enough to declare war against the entire county."

The puncher sat erect and laughed harshly. "You don't?" he inquired in an over-gentle, polite voice. "Mister Hollis," he added, as the latter looked quickly at him, "you ain't heard nothin' from the Circle Bar to-day, I reckon?"

Hollis's answer was negative. The Circle Y man's face grew suddenly serious. "You ain't! Well, then, that's the reason you're talkin' so. The last I heard from the Circle Bar was that Norton an' some of your men had captured one of Dunlavey's men—Greasy—rebrandin' some Circle Bar steers an' was gettin' ready to string him up. I reckon mebbe you'd call that doin' somethin'!"

Hollis straightened. He had suddenly forgotten the heat, the dust, and the problem of water.

"How long ago did you hear this?" he demanded sharply.

"'Bout an hour ago," returned the Circle Y man. "I was rustlin' up these strays down in the basin an' headin' them toward the crick when I runs plum into a man from the Three Bar outfit. He was plum excited over it. Said they'd ketched Greasy

down by the Narrows sometime after noon an'——"

But the Circle Y man finished to the empty air for Hollis's pony had leaped forward into a cloud of dust, running desperately.

When Hollis reached the Circle Bar ranchhouse there was no one about. He rode up to the front gallery and dismounted, thinking that perhaps Norton would be in the house. But before he had crossed the gallery Mrs. Norton came to the door. She was pale and laboring under great excitement, but instantly divined Hollis's errand.

"They've taken him down to the cottonwood!" she told Hollis. "They are going to hang him! Hurry!"

Hollis was back in the saddle in an instant and racing his pony down past the bunk house at break-neck speed. He urged the little animal across an intervening stretch of plain, up a slight rise, down into a shallow valley, and into the cottonwood, riding recklessly through the trees and urging the pony at a headlong pace through the underbrush.

For ten minutes he rode as he had never ridden before. And then he came upon them. They stood at the base of a fir-balsam, whose gnarled limbs spread flatly outward—three Circle Bar men, a half dozen from the various outfits whose herds grazed his range, and the rustler—Greasy—a rope knotted about his neck, standing directly under one of the out-spreading limbs of the tree, his head bowed. The rope had been thrown over the limb and several men were holding it, preparatory to drawing it taut. Norton was standing near, his face pale, his lips straight and grim with determination. Apparently Hollis had arrived just in time.

NONE of the men moved from their places when Hollis dismounted, but all looked at him as though expecting him to express approval of what they were about to do. Several lowered their gaze with embarrassment when they saw that he did not approve.

"What is all this about, Norton?" he asked.

Norton smiled grimly. "We were roundin' up a few strays just the other side of the Narrows this morning, and Ace and Weary were workin' down the river. In that little stretch of gully just the other side of the Narrows they came upon this sneak brandin' two of our beeves through a piece of wet blanket. He'd already done it an' so we ketched him with the goods. It's the first time we've ever been able to lay a hand on one of Dunlavey's gunnies, an' we was figgerin' on makin' an example of him."

Hollis met Norton's grim gaze and smiled. "I want to thank you—all of you, for guarding my interests so zealously," he said. "There is no doubt that this man deserves hanging, but I take it none of you want to make me appear ridiculous?"

"Sure not," came several voices in chorus.

Hollis laughed. "But you took the surest way of making me appear so," he returned.

He saw Norton's face flush and he knew that the latter had already grasped the significance of his words. The others, simpler of mind, looked at him, plainly puzzled. He would have to explain more fully to them. He did so. When he had shown them that in hanging the rustler he would be violating the principle that he had elected to defend, they stood before him abashed, thoroughly disarmed.

"What are you goin' to do with the cuss?" queried one man.

"We have a sheriff in Dry Bottom, I expect?" questioned Hollis.

Grins appeared on the faces of several of the men; the prisoner's face lighted.

"Oh, yes," said one; "I reckon Bill Watkins is the sheriff all right."

"Then we'll take him to Bill Watkins," decided Hollis.

The grins on the faces of several of the men grew. Norton laughed.

"I reckon you ain't got acquainted with Bill yet, Hollis," he said. "Bill owes his place to Dunlavey. There has never been a rustler convicted by Watkins yet. I reckon there won't ever be any convicted—unless he's been caught stealin' Dunlavey's cattle. Bill's justice is a joke."

Hollis smiled grimly. He had learned that much from Judge Graney. He did not expect to secure justice, but he wished to have something tangible upon which to work to force the law into the country. His duty in the matter consisted only in delivering the prisoner into the custody of the sheriff. The sheriff would be held responsible for him. There was no other lawful way.

He was not surprised that the men

agreed with him. They had had much experience in dealing with Dunlavey; they had never been successful, and they were quite willing to trust to Hollis's judgment.

"I reckon you're just about right," said one who had spoken before. "Stringin' this guy up would finish him all right. But that wouldn't settle the thing. What's needed is to get it fixed up for good an' all."

"Correct!" agreed Hollis; "you've got it exactly. We might hang a dozen men for stealing cattle and we could go on hanging them. We've got no right to hang anyone —we've got a law for that purpose. Then let's make the law act!"

The prisoner had stood in his place, watching the men around him, his face betraying varying emotions. When it had been finally agreed to take him to Dry Bottom and deliver him over to the sheriff he grinned broadly. But he said nothing as they took the rope from around his neck, forced him to mount a horse and surrounding him, rode out of the cottonwood toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

DUSK had fallen by the time Greasy had been brought to the bunkhouse, and Mrs. Norton had lighted the kerosene lamps when Norton and Hollis, assured of the safety of the prisoner, left the bunkhouse and went into the house for supper. Potter had washed the dust of travel from him and when Norton and Hollis arrived he was seated on the porch, awaiting them. Mrs. Norton greeted them with a smile. Her eyes expressed gratitude as they met Hollis's.

"I am so glad you were in time," she said, "I told Neil not to do it, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"You might have tried 'bossing' him," suggested Hollis, remembering his range boss's words on the occasion of his first meeting with Norton's wife.

"Mebbe I was stretchin' things a little when I told you that," interrupted Norton, grinning shamelessly. "If a man told the truth all the time he'd have a hard time keepin' ahead of a woman."

After supper Hollis and Norton went out upon the porch. A slight breeze had sprung up with the dusk, though the sky was still cloudless. At ten o'clock, when they retired, the breeze had increased in velocity, sighing mournfully through the trees, though there was no perceptible change in the atmosphere—it seemed that the wind was merely shifting the heat waves from one point to another.

"A good, decent rain would save lots of trouble to-morrow," said Norton as he and Hollis stood on the porch, taking a last look at the sky before going to bed.

"Do you really think Dunlavey will carry out his threat?" questioned Hollis. "Somehow I can't help but think that he was bluffing when he said it."

"He don't do much bluffin'," declared Norton.

"But there is plenty of water in the Rabbit-Ear," returned Hollis; "plenty for all the cattle that are here now."

Norton flashed a swift glance at him. "I reckon you ain't been watchin' the Rabbit-Ear for the last day or so?"

Hollis admitted that he had not seen the river within that time. Norton laughed shortly.

"She's dry in spots now," he informed Hollis. "There ain't any water at all in the shallows. It's tricklin' through in some places, but mostly there's nothin' but water holes an' dried, baked mud. In two days more, if it don't rain, there won't be water enough for our own stock. Then what?"

"There will be water for every steer on the range as long at it lasts," declared Hollis grimly. "After that we'll all take our medicine together."

"Good!" declared Norton. "That's what I expected of you. But I don't think it's goin' to work out that way. Weary was ridin' the Razor Back this mornin' and he says he saw Dunlavey an' Yuma and some more Circle Cross guys nosin' around behind some brush on the other side of the creek. They all had rifles."

Hollis's face paled slightly. "Where are the other men—Train and the rest?" he inquired.

"Down on Razor Back," Norton informed him; "they sneaked down there after Weary told me about seein' Dunlavey on the other side. Likely they're scattered by now—keepin' an eye out for trouble."

"Well," decided Hollis, "there isn't any use of looking for it. It finds all of us soon enough. Tomorrow is the tenth day and I am sure that if Dunlavey carries out his threat he won't start anything until to-morrow. Therefore I am going to bed." He laughed. "Call me if you hear any shooting. I may want to take a hand in it."

They parted—Hollis going to his room

and Norton stepping down off the porch to take a turn down around the pasture to look after the horses.

Hollis was tired after his experiences of the day and soon dropped off to sleep. It seemed that he had ben asleep only a few minutes, however, when he felt a hand shaking him, and a voice—Norton's voice.

"Hollis!" said the range boss. "Hollis! Wake up!"

Hollis sat erect, startled into perfect wakefulness. He could not see Norton's face in the dark, but he swung around and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Have they started?"

He heard Norton laugh, and there was satisfaction in the laugh. "Started?" he repeated. "Well, I reckon something's started. Listen!"

HOLLIS listened. A soft patter on the roof, a gentle sighing of the wind, and a distant, low rumble reached his ears. He started up. "Why, it's raining!" he said.

Norton chuckled, "Rainin'!" he chirped joyously. "It's pourin'! It's a cloud-burst, that's what it is!"

Hollis did not answer. He ran to the window and stuck his head out. The rain came against his head and shoulders in stinging, vicious slants. He could dimly see the pasture—the horses huddled in a corner under the shelter that had been erected for them; he could see the tops of the trees in the cottonwood grove—bending, twisting, leaning from the wind; the bunkhouse door was open, a stream of light illuminating a space in which stood several of the cowboys. Some were attired as usual, others but scantily, but all were outside in the rain, singing, shouting, and pounding one another in an excess of joy. For half an hour Hollis stood at the window, watching them, looking out at the storm. There was no break anywhere in the sky from horizon to horizon. Plainly there was to be plenty of rain. Convinced of this he drew a deep breath of satisfaction, humor moving him.

"I hope Dunlavey and his men don't get wet," he said. He went to his trousers and took out his watch. The hands pointed to fifteen minutes after one. "It's the tenth day," he smiled.

He sighed with satisfaction, and rolled into bed. For a long time he lay, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof, and then dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Hollis got out of bed at six o'clock that same morning he heard surprising sounds outside. Slipping on his clothes he went to the window and looked out. Men were yelling at one another, screeching delightful oaths, capering about hatless, coatless, in the rain that still came steadily down. The corral yard was a mire of sticky mud in which the horses reared and plunged in evident appreciation of the welcome change from dry heat to life-giving moisture. Riderless horses stood about, no one caring about the saddles, several calves capered awkwardly in the pasture.

Norton stood down by the door of the bunkhouse, grinning with delight. Near him stood Lemuel Train, and several of the other small ranchers whose stock had grazed for more than two weeks on the Circle Bar range without objection from Hollis. They saw him and motioned for him to come down, directing original oaths at him for sleeping so late on so "fine a morning."

He dressed hastily and went down. They all ate breakfast in the mess house, the cook being adjured to "spread it on for all he was worth"—which he did. Certainly no one left the mess house hungry. During the meal Lemuel Train made a speech on behalf of himself and the other owners who had enjoyed Hollis's hospitality, assuring him that they were "with him" from now on. Then they departed, each going his separate way to round up his cattle and drive them back to the home ranch.

The rain continued throughout the day and far into the night. The dried, gasping country absorbed water until it was sated and then began to shed it off into the arroyos, the gullies, the depressions, and the river beds.

Before dawn on the following day all the small ranchers had departed. Several of them, on their way to their home ranches, stopped off at the Circle Bar to shake hands with Hollis and assure him of their appreciation. Lemuel Train did not forget to curse Dunlavey.

"We ain't likely to forget how he stood on the water proposition," he said.

After breakfast Hollis gave orders to have Greasy prepared for travel, and an hour later he and the range boss, both armed with rifles, rode out of the corral yard with Greasy riding between them and took the Dry Bottom trail.

The earth had already dried; the trail was hard, level, and dustless, and traveling was a pleasure. But neither of the three spoke a word to one another during the entire trip to Dry Bottom.

At ten o'clock they rode into Dry Bottom. There were not many persons about, but those who were gave instant evidence of interest in the three by watching them closely as they rode down the street to the sheriff's office, dismounted, and disappeared inside.

The sheriff's office was in a little frame shanty not over sixteen feet square, crude and unfinished. There were a front and back door and two windows. For furniture there were a bench, two chairs, and a rough wooden table which served as a desk. In a chair beside the desk sat a tall, lean-faced man, whose lips were partly concealed under a drooping, tobacco-stained mustache. He turned as the three men entered, leaning back in his chair, motioning them to the chair and the bench. They filed in silently. Greasy dropped carelessly into the chair, Norton took a seat on the bench, but Hollis remained standing.

"You are the sheriff, I suppose?" inquired the latter.

"Yep," the official returned shortly, his voice coming with a truculent snap. "You wantin' the sheriff?"

Hollis saw a swift, significant glance pass between him and Greasy and he smiled slightly.

"Yes," he returned quietly; "we want you. We are delivering this man into your custody."

"What's he done?" demanded the sheriff

"I charge him with stealing two of my steers," returned Hollis. "Several of my men discovered him at work the day before yesterday and——"

"Hold on a minute now!" interrupted the sheriff. "Let's git this thing goin' accordin' to the law." He spat copiously into a convenient cuspidor. "Who might you be?" he questioned.

"My name is Hollis," returned the latter quietly, his eyes meeting the other's steadily. "I own the Circle Bar."

"H'm!" The sheriff crossed his legs and stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, revealing a nickle-plated star on the lapel of the latter. "H'm. Your name's Hollis, an' you own the Circle Bar. Seems I've heard of you. Tenderfoot, ain't you? Come out here to try an' show folks how to run things?"

"Mebbe he'll know more about how to run things, dryly observed Norton, "after he's watched Bill Watkins run a law shebang a while."

"I don't reckon anyone ast you to stick your gab in this here affair?" demanded the sheriff of Norton.

"No," returned Norton, drawling, "no one asked me. It strikes me that when a man's runnin' a law shop he ought to run her."

"I reckon I'll run her without any help from you, Norton!" snapped the sheriff.

"Why, sure!" agreed the latter, his gaze level as his eyes met the sheriff's, his voice even and sarcastic. "But I'm tellin' you that this man's my friend an' if there's any compliments goin' to be handed around I'm warnin' you that you want to hand them out soft an' gentle like. That's all. I reckon we c'n now proceed."

THE sheriff's face bloated poisonously. He flashed a malignant glance at Hollis. "Well," he snapped, "what's the charge?"

"I've already told you," returned Hollis. "It's stealing cattle."

"How stealin' them?" demanded the Sheriff truculenty.

"Changing the brand," Hollis informed him. He related how Ace and Weary had come upon the prisoner while the latter was engaged in changing his brand to the Circle Cross.

"They see him brandin'?" questioned the sheriff when Hollis had concluded.

Hollis told him that the two men had come upon Greasy after the brand had been applied, but that the cattle bore the Circle Bar ear-mark, and that Greasy had built a fire and that branding irons had been found in his possession—which he had tried to hide when discovered by the Circle Bar men.

"Then your men didn't really see him doin' the brandin'?" questioned Watkins.

Hollis was forced to admit that they had not. Watkins smiled sarcastically.

"I reckon you're runnin' a little bit wild," he remarked. "Some of your stock

has been rebranded an' you're chargin' a certain man with doin' it—only you didn't see him doin' it." He turned to Greasy. "What you got to say about this, Greasy?" he demanded.

Greasy grinned blandly at Hollis. "This guy's talkin' through his hat," he sneered. "I ain't allowin' that I branded any of his cattle."

Watkins smiled. "There don't seem to be nothin' to this case a-tall—not a-tall. There ain't nobody goin' to be took into custody by me for stealin' cattle unless they're ketched with the goods—an' that ain't been proved so far." He turned to Hollis. "You got anything more to say about it?" he demanded.

"Only this," returned Hollis slowly and evenly, "I brought this man here. I charge him with stealing my cattle. To use your term—he was caught 'with the goods.' He is guilty. If you take him into custody and bring him to trial I shall have two witnesses there to prove what I have already told you. If you do not take him into custody, it is perfectly plain that you are deliberately shielding him—that you are making a joke of the law."

Watkin's face reddened angrily. "Mebbe I'm makin' a joke of it——" he began.

"Of course we can't force you to arrest this man," resumed Hollis, interrupting Watkins. "I did not expect you to arrest him—I tell you that frankly. I merely brought him here to see whether it were true that you were leagued with Dunlavey against the other ranchers in the country. You are, of course. Therefore, as we cannot secure justice by appealing to you we will be forced to adopt other means."

The sheriff's right hand dropped to his gun holster. He sneered, his lips writhing. "Mebbe you mean——" he began.

"I ain't lettin' this here situation get beyond my control," came Norton's voice, cold and even, as his six-shooter came out and was shoved menacingly forward. "Whatever he means, Watkins, he's my friend an' you ain't runnin' in no cold lead proposition on him." He smiled mirthlessly.

Watkins's face paled; his right hand fell away from the pistol holster. There was a sound at the door; it swung suddenly open and Dunlavey's gigantic frame loomed massively in the opening.

"I'm looking for Greasy!" he announced, looking around at the four men. "I was expecting to find him here, after I heard that he'd been nabbed by the Circle Bar men."

Norton smiled coldly. "He's here, Bill," he said evenly. "He's stayin' here till Mr. Hollis says it's time for him to go."

He did not move the weapon in his hand, but a certain glint in his eyes told Dunlavey that the pistol was not in his hand for mere show. The latter smiled knowingly.

"I ain't interfering with the law," he said mockingly. "And I certainly ain't bucking your game, Norton." He turned to Watkins, speaking with broad insinuation: "Of course you are putting a charge against Greasy, Watkins?" he said.

They all caught the sheriff's flush as he answered that he had not. Dunlavey turned to Hollis with a bland smile.

"Have you any objection to allowing Greasy to go now, Mr. Hollis?"

Hollis's smile was no less bland as his gaze met Dunlavey's. "Not the slightest objection, Mr. Dunlavey," he returned. "I congratulate you upon the way in which your pigs grovel for you!" He smiled at Norton. "Mr. Norton," he said with polite mockery, "I feel certain that you agree with me that we have no wish to contaminate this temple of justice with our presence."

He strode to the door and stepped down into the street. Norton followed him, grinning, though he did not sheath his weapon until he also was in the street.

As they strode away from the door they turned to see Dunlavey looking out after them, his face wreathed in a broad smile.

"There is plenty of law in Union County, Mr. Hollis," he said, "if you know how to handle it!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE next issue of the *Kicker* contained many things of interest to its readers. Now that the drought had been broken, Union County could proceed with its business of raising cattle without fear of any future lack of water, with plenty of grass, and no losses except those from the usual causes.

More advertisements were appearing in the paper. Dry Bottom merchants were beginning to realize that it deserved their support, and with few exceptions they

openly began to voice their opinions that the editor would "make good."

When the *Kicker* appeared following the incident in the sheriff's office, there was a detailed account of Dunlavey's now famous "ten day edict." Hollis called attention to Dunlavey' selfishness, to the preparations that had been made by him to shoot down all the foreign cattle on the Rabbit-Ear. He made no reference to his part in the affair—but though he did not mention this, the small owners and his friends took care that the matter received full publicity.

In the same issue of the paper was also related the story of Greasy's capture by the Circle Bar men. Following the story of the capture was a detailed report of the incident in the sheriff's office and a scathing commentary upon the subservience of the latter official to Dunlavey's will.

Below this, under the heading, "Union County Needs a New Sheriff," appeared an article that created a sensation. This dwelt upon the necessity of the county having a sheriff who would not permit his office to be prostituted by any man or influence. The *Kicker* named a man who would not be bribed or cowed. At the end of the article he printed the man's name—Ben Allen!

He had made this announcement without authority, and therefore he was not surprised, soon after the appearance of the issue containing the article, to see Allen's figure darken the door of the *Kicker* office while he sat at his desk.

"Durn your hide!" cried the latter as he stood in the doorway; "you're the biggest disturber in seven states!"

"Perhaps," smiled Hollis, motioning Allen to a chair. "Still, you don't need to thank me. You see, I have decided to clean up this county and I need some help. I supposed you were interested. Of course you may refuse if you like."

"Refuse!" Allen's eyes flashed as he took Hollis's hand and wrung it heartily. "My boy," he declared earnestly, "you couldn't have done anything to suit me better. Do you think there's a chance for us to beat Dunlavey?"

Hollis laughed. "I flatter myself that a certain editor in this town stands rather well with the people of this county."

"You sure do!" grinned Allen.

Hollis smiled. "Then you won't object to being the *Kicker's* candidate?" he inquired.

"Object!" returned Allen with mock seriousness. "Say, young man, if you don't keep my name at the head of your editorial column from now till the first Monday in November I'll come down here and manhandle you!"

And so it was arranged. Dry Bottom gasped in public but rejoiced in secret. Many of the town's merchants personally congratulated Hollis.

But for two days following the appearance of the issue of the *Kicker* containing these sensations, Hollis stayed away from Dry Bottom. Now that he had launched Allen's campaign, he began to devote some attention to the problem of arranging for Ed Hazelton's visit to the Chicago surgeon. Both Nellie and Ed had been disappointed because of his continued absence, and when, on an afternoon a few days after his activity in Dry Bottom, he rode up to the Hazelton cabin his welcome was a cordial one.

"It seems like a year since I've seen you!" declared Hazelton as he came down from the porch to lead Hollis's pony into the shade at the rear of the cabin.

WHILE he was gone with the pony Hollis stood looking up at Nellie, who had remained seated in her chair on the porch and who was now regarding him with eyes in which shone unconcealed pleasure.

"It hasn't really been so long, you know," said Hollis, smiling at her.

She made room for him on the porch. Ed appeared presently and joined them there. The young man was not able to conceal his joy over the prospect of his ultimate recovery from the peculiar malady that afflicted him.

"We've got it all arranged," he told Hollis. "I'm going to Chicago just as soon as I can get things fixed." He reddened with embarrassment as he continued: "There's some things that I'd like to talk to you about before I make up my mind when to start," he said; "I've been worrying about what to do with my stock while I'm gone. I wouldn't want it to stray or be run off by Dunlavey's gang."

"I thought of that too," smiled Hollis. "In fact, I talked it over with Norton. He tells me that he won't have any trou-

ble in caring for your stock while you are away."

"Thanks." Hazelton said. "That will make things much easier for Nellie."

"Easier?" inquired Hollis, puzzled. He had supposed that Nellie would accompany her brother to Chicago.

"But you can't allow her to stay at the cabin alone!" he said when Ed did not answer. And then the thought struck him that this peculiar silence on Ed's part could mean only one thing—that he and Nellie had decided that she was not to accompany him, and that the problem that was now confronting them was the girl's welfare. He appreciated the situation and smiled wisely into the yawning distance.

"I have sometimes wondered how it were possible for a woman to live in this country without having close at hand one of her sex with whom to gossip," he remarked, looking at Ed and deliberately closing an eye at him. "It doesn't bother a man so much—this being alone. But a woman! Of course it's different with a woman. A woman must talk—she simply can't help it. There's Mrs. Norton. Only this morning I chanced to hear her remark to her lord and master that if he did not soon provide her with a companion with whom she might exchange gossip, he might as well make up his mind to requisition the mourners. All of which suggests the thought that perhaps it would not be a bad idea for Miss Hazelton to bundle up her things and advance on the Circle Bar. Thus two ends will be served —Mrs. Norton will secure her companion and Norton will find peace." He turned to Nellie. "Of course if you are afraid that the cabin will stray during your absence I could manage to ride the Coyote trail each morning and evening—or you could ride over yourself occasionally."

He could tell by the light in her eyes that she was pleased over the suggestion.

That night Hollis acquainted Mrs. Norton with the facts in the case, even going so far as to inform the lady brazenly that he had deliberately lied about her. But when she had been fully informed, she told Hollis that she did not blame him very much, and that should Nellie come to her, she would assure the young lady that Hollis had spoken the plain truth.

The following morning on his way to Dry Bottom, Hollis took the Coyote trail and stopped off at the Hazelton cabin, where he informed Ed that he had decided to send Weary with him on his trip to Chicago.

DURING the week following Ed Hazelton's departure for Chicago Hollis did not see much of Nellie. In the few days preceding his departure she had not allowed her brother to see how his refusal to allow her to accompany him had hurt her, but once he had boarded the eastbound express at Dry Bottom, she had yielded to the emotions that she had so far succeeded in concealing. Hollis had ridden in to town with them, and not until Nellie and he had seen Ed and Weary safely on the train, did Nellie break down. Then Hollis turned to her with a smile to see the sudden tears well up into her eyes. He had not attempted to console her, feeling the awkwardness of the situation.

He was much relieved when she refused his offer to make the return trip with her, for he was certain that a few hours alone in which to meditate over her loss would enable her to regain her composure. But before leaving her he secured her promise not to stop at the cabin, but to go on to the Circle Bar. But once out of Hollis's sight Nellie forgot her promise. She took the Coyote trail, riding slowly through the clear sunshine of the morning.

After taking leave of Nellie Hollis rode slowly down the street to the *Kicker* office.

At noon Potter arrived bearing the news that he had seen Nellie Hazelton on the Coyote trail, within a few miles of the Circle Bar. She had stopped at her cabin and there were several bundles strapped to the cantle of her saddle.

That night Hollis did not see her at all. He did not inquire for her, but surmised that she was in her room.

At breakfast the next morning he looked closely at her several times, searching for evidence of her grief of yesterday. There was none. Therefore he was not surprised when, after breakfast, she told him that she intended riding with him as far as the cabin for the purpose of bringing the remainder of her effects. He gravely reminded her that she had broken her promise of yesterday, and that as a punishment he contemplated refusing her request. But when, an hour later, he urged his pony

down the river trail she was riding beside him.

But she did not ride again that week. She did not tell Hollis the reason; that returning that evening she had reached the Razor Back and was riding along its crest when she happened to glance across the Rabbit-Ear toward the Circle Cross. On the opposite side of the river she had seen two men, sitting quietly in their saddles, watching her. They were Dunlavey and Yuma. She did not know what their presence there meant, but the sight was disquieting and she feared to return to the cabin for the few things that were still here.

But as the days went her fears were dispersed. Time and the lure of her old home had revived her courage, and on a day about a week following her previous trip, she set out over the Coyote trail toward her cabin.

She had not told Hollis of her intention to ride there, fearing that the knowledge of what she had seen on the day of the other ride would be revealed in her eyes. It was a good hour after noon when she stole out of the house to her pony, mounted, and rode away toward the river.

But when she reached her cabin she had forgotten Dunlavey and Yuma; her thoughts dwelt upon more pleasant people.

She dismounted from her pony at the edge of the porch, hitching the animal to one of the slender porch columns. Then she went into the house to gather up the few things that still remained there.

But for a long time after entering the cabin she sat on a chair in the kitchen, sobbing softly, for now that Ed had gone she felt the desolation of the country more than ever. Presently she rose and with a start looked out of the door. The dusk had fallen; darkness was stealing into the valley around the cabin!

Flitting here and there, she hurriedly began packing things which she took from shelves and racks. It was an engrossing task and she was much interested in it, so much so that she did not hear a slight sound at the door that led out to the front porch. But when she saw a shadow darken the doorway of the room in which she was working she stood suddenly erect and with rapidly beating heart stole softly forward and peered around the door-jamb. Of course it could be no one but Hollis. He had taken the Coyote trail to-night. He would be surprised to see her.

BUT it was she who was surprised. Yuma stood near the table in the center of the kitchen, looking straight at her, his insolent, evil face drawn into a foreboding smile.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Yuma laughed softly. "I saw you ridin' the Razor Back the other day," he said. "I saw you again thees afternoon—but you not see me like the other day.

"Ed gone," he continued, watching her narrowly; "nobody here; I come. I like you—much." He grinned, his eyes brightening. "I reckon you know—you girl that understan'?"

She drew a slow deep breath. She made a pretense of boldness, though she felt more like screaming.

"Leave this cabin!" she commanded sharply.

Yuma did not change his position. "Leave heem?" he laughed. "I theenk not. Dunlavey says me come here—make um love me—same as tenderfoot noospaper man!" He laughed again, exultantly. "Dunlavey say you spark tenderfoot—you spark me!"

She trembled, realizing that a crisis was at hand and that she must meet it boldly. She thought of the ivory-handled weapon in the holster at her hip.

She stepped backward and her right hand sought the butt of the revolver, the left closing on the edge of the door that opened into her room. Terror had given her courage and as Yuma advanced she drew the revolver and levelled it, though her hand wavered a little.

"If you take another step toward me, Yuma, I'll kill you!" she declared.

She saw his little eyes glitter with decision, saw him measure the distance between them, saw him crouch for a spring.

She fired aiming at the lower edge of the scarf that sagged at his throat. The smoke from the pistol blinded her; she heard his laugh, heard the rush of his feet as he hurled himself forward. Terror stricken over her failure to hit him, she dropped the pistol and whirled, grasping the edge of the door and slamming it shut in his face. She felt his weight against it, but he had been taken by surprise by the movement; there was the strength of des-

peration in her body and she held the door closed against him while she shoved the fastenings into place.

Then, suddenly overcome, she leaned weakly against the jamb, her heart thumping hard, her nerves tingling.

For a long time she did not move, and there came no sound from the other side of the door to tell her of Yuma's movements. There was a wild hope in her heart that he had gone, but presently, becoming a little calmer, she pressed her ear against the door. There was no doubt of Yuma's presence; she could hear him stepping softly about the room.

She fell to thinking of the revolver she had dropped when Yuma had sprung upon her. It must have dropped very close to the door. Had Yuma picked it up? There was a chance that he had not. If the weapon were still there and she could open the door and secure it and close the door again, she would be in a position to defend herself.

She stood for some little time at the door, her ear pressed against it, listening for any sound that might tell her of the whereabouts of Yuma in the cabin. She heard nothing. Presently she heard a horse whinny. Was Yuma at the horses?

But for a long time, she kept her ear pressed against the door. Then, moved by a sudden impulse—an accession of courage inspired by the continued silence—she cautiously loosened the fastenings and swung the door slowly open.

HER revolver lay close and with a swift movement she reached for it. As her fingers grasped its butt she heard a slight sound and Yuma was upon her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. She struggled desperately, squirming and twisting in his grasp, silently matching her strength against his. Finding this hopeless and feeling his hand gradually slipping toward the revolver, she suddenly raised her hand toward her face, bringing Yuma's hand, still on her arm, with it. Then she dropped her head to his arm near the wrist, and sank her teeth savagely into the flesh.

Yuma howled in anguish, loosening his hold momentarily. In an instant she had wrenched herself free and had bounded to the center of the room, placing the kitchen table between herself and her assailant.

But he was after her with a bound, his little eyes gleaming with a venomous expression, his face contorted with passion. She raised the revolver and fired. For a breathless instant she thought that she had hit him, for he sank almost to the floor. But she saw that it was only a trick for he was up again on the instant, a mocking smile on his face and closer than ever. She fired again, and when she saw him sink to the floor she pulled the trigger a third time. He had been very close to the table when she fired the last time and before she could press the trigger again he had lurched forward under it, raising it on his shoulders and sending it crashing down behind him as he confronted her, his evil face close to hers, his hands again gripping her arms.

She fought him silently, and together they reeled around the cabin. She bit him again, and then in an outburst of savage fury he brutally twisted the arm in which she still held the revolver, sending the weapon crashing to the floor. While twisting her arm he had been compelled to loosen his grasp of the other slightly, and she again wrenched herself free and darted toward the door leading to the porch. But he bounded forward, intercepting her, and with a last, despairing effort she raised both hands to his face and clawed furiously at his eyes.

She heard a savage curse from him, saw the lust of murder in his little, glittering eyes, felt his sinewy fingers at her throat. Then objects within the cabin swam in a dizzy, blurring circle before her. She heard a crash—seeming to come from a great distance; heard Yuma curse again. And then, borne resistlessly forward by the weight of his body, she tumbled to the floor in an inert heap.

CHAPTER XV

SHORTLY after noon on the same day Hollis, finding work irksome, closed his desk with a bang, told Potter that he was going home, mounted his pony, and loped the animal out the Dry Bottom trail. He remembered hearing Norton tell one of the men that morning that he suspected that several of Ed Hazelton's cattle were still in the vicinity of the basin near the Hazelton cabin, and he determined to ride around that way and try to turn them back toward the Circle Bar. It would be recreation for him after a hot morning in the office.

He took a circuitous route and some time later came out upon a high ridge overlooking a basin. There were some cattle down there and he made a mental note of the locality so that he would be able to tell Norton where to have the men look for the cattle. Then he rode along the ridge until he could no longer see the basin. He spent most of the afternoon exploring the surrounding country, and then when the dusk began to fall he retraced his steps to the ridge upon which he had ridden earlier in the afternoon. Something familiar in the shape of the hills near him struck him and he halted his pony and smiled. These were the hills that he had seen many times from the Hazelton porch. He rode back and forth a few moments, and then, coming out on a bald spot on the ridge, he saw the cabin.

It was about a mile away, snuggled comfortably down in a little basin, with some trees and shrubbery flanking it on both sides. He smiled as he looked at it, and then suddenly his face clouded, for he saw two ponies hitched to the porch. His forehead wrinkled perplexedly over this. He was certain that Nellie rode the same animal each time. One of the horses belonged to her, for he could see the gay ribbon with which she was accustomed to decorate her animal's bridle. But to whom did the other horse belong? He gazed steadily toward the cabin, searching for signs of life on the porch.

Certainly Nellie must have a visitor. But who? He was not aware that the Hazeltons had made friends with anyone in the neighborhood besides himself and the Nortons. He smiled. Probably some cowboy from the Circle Bar had been in the vicinity looking for Hazelton's cattle, had met Nellie, and had stopped at the cabin. He remembered to have heard Norton say that he was sending a man in that direction some time that day.

That must be the explanation. But while he sat, debating the propriety of riding down to the cabin to satisfy his curiosity, the sound of a pistol shot floated to his ears on the slight breeze that was blowing toward him.

He sat erect, his facing paling. Then he smiled again. He had been in the West long enough to become acquainted with the cowboy nature and he surmised that Nellie's visitor was very likely exhibiting his skill with the revolver. But he turned his pony and urged it down the sloping side of the ridge, riding slowly in the direction of the cabin.

After striking the bottom of the slope he rode out upon a broad level that stretched away for half a mile. He made better time here and had almost covered half the width of the plain when three more reports reached his ears. He was close enough now to hear them distinctly and it seemed to him that they sounded muffled. He halted the pony and sat stiffly in the saddle, his gaze on the cabin. Then he saw a thin stream of blue-white smoke issue from the doorway and curl lazily upward.

A grave doubt assailed him. No cowboy would be likely to exhibit his skill with a weapon in the cabin! Nellie's visitor must be an unwelcome one!

The pony felt the sudden spurs and raced like a whirlwind over the remaining stretch of plain. Hollis had become suddenly imbued with a suspicion that brought an ashen pallor to his face and an awful rage into his heart. He slid his pony down one side of a steep arroyo, sent it scrambling up the other side, jumped it over some rocks that littered the rise, spurred savagely through a little basin, and reaching the edge of the porch, dismounted and bounded to the door.

He saw two figures—Nellie Hazelton and a man. He saw the man's fingers gripping the girl's throat and the lust of murder surged over and blinded him. In the dusk that had fallen he could only dimly see the man's head and he swung his right fist at it, putting every ounce of his strength into the blow. He felt the fist strike, realized that it had glanced, and tried to recover for a second blow.

But the terrific swing had carried him off his balance. He whirled clear around, slipped, and came down to the floor flat on his face. He was up in an instant, however, his brain afire with rage. He did not think of the gun at his hip, he wanted only to hit the man—to seize him and tear him apart.

FIVE feet from him, facing him, on his hands and knees and scrambling to rise, was the man. He recognized Yuma, and even as he bounded forward the latter gained his feet and tugged at his gun-holster. The weapon had not yet cleared the holster when Hollis was upon him. He struck again with his right fist and missed,

crashing against Yuma in his eagerness and carrying him down to the floor with a force that shook the cabin. As they fell Hollis felt a sharp, agonizing pain in his left wrist, from which the splints had been only recently removed, and the hand hung limp at his side, entirely useless.

For an instant after the fall Yuma lay still, breathing heavily. Then he made a sudden movement with his right arm and Hollis caught a glint of metal. He threw himself at the arm, catching it with his right hand just above the wrist and jamming it tight to the floor. Yuma tried to squirm free, failed, and with a curse drove his left fist into the side of Hollis's face. Again he tried to squirm free and during the struggle that followed the hand holding the pistol was raised from the floor. Hollis saw it and wrenched desperately at the arm, twisting it and dragging it furiously downward to the floor. Yuma shrieked with rage and pain as the force of the impact cracked his knuckles and sent the weapon clattering ten feet away.

For an instant both men lay silent, panting from their exertions. But the lithe half-breed was up like a cat, bounding toward the pistol on the floor. He was bending over it, his fingers gripping its butt, when Hollis, throwing himself forward bodily, crashed into him and hurled him heavily to the floor.

This time Yuma lay face downward, his arms outstretched, and Hollis lay sprawled out on top of him. But Yuma had succeeded in holding to the pistol; it was grasped in his outstretched right hand, just out of Hollis's reach. Hollis bounded to his feet, striking Yuma a crashing blow in the face. While Yuma reeled he brought his booted foot down on the hand holding the pistol, grinding it under his heel.

Yuma screamed with pain and rage and got to his feet, holding his injured hand with the other. The pistol lay on the floor. For an instant Yuma stood gripping his hand, his face hideous with passion. Then with a snarl of rage and hate he drew a knife from the folds of his shirt and sprang toward Hollis.

Hollis tensed himself for the clash, rapidly measuring the distance, and when Yuma came close enough caught him squarely on the side of the jaw with a vicious right swing. But in some manner when Hollis stepped aside to avoid Yuma's knife, his feet had become entangled with the legs of the table that Yuma had previously overturned. As he struck he slipped, the blow at Yuma's jaw not having the force he intended it to have. He caught himself, slipped again and went down, turning completely over the table top and falling face downward to the floor. He saw Yuma throw himself forward and he tried to wriggle out of danger, but he failed. He felt the half-breed's weight on his body, saw the knife flash in the dull light. He tried to roll over and grasp the knife in its descent, but could not, his left arm, now useless, being pinned to the floor by Yuma's knee.

A revolver roared spitefully—once—twice. Yuma's knife hissed past Hollis's ear and struck the floor, its point sunk deep, its handle swaying idly back and forth. Yuma himself—inert, limp, rolled from Hollis's back and lay flat on his own, his eyes wide open and staring, two huge bullet holes in his forehead. And in the open doorway of the cabin stood Ten Spot.

For an instant Hollis could not realize his escape. He looked at Yuma and then again at Ten Spot. Slowly and painfully he got to his feet, looking around at the wreck of the room. Staggering a little, he walked to where Ten Spot stood, gripping the latter's hand silently, at a loss for words with which to thank him.

But apparently Ten Spot did not notice the omission, for he grinned broadly.

"I reckon there's folks which would call that a right clever bit of shootin'," he said, "seein' as there wasn't time to pull off no fancy stuff!"

THE crash of Ten Spot's pistols aroused Nellie Hazelton, and she sat up and stared stupidly about—at Hollis, who was just rising from the floor; at Ten Spot, who still stood in the doorway; and then at Yuma's body, stretched out on the floor beside the overturned table. She shuddered and covered her face with her hands. The next instant Hollis was bending over her, helping her to her feet, leading her to the door and assuring her in a low, earnest voice that everything was all right. She allowed herself to be led out on the porch, but once there she looked at him with renewed spirit.

"It was you who came first," she said; "I didn't see you, but I heard Yuma curse, felt something strike him, and then—I must

have fainted. You see, I felt it must be you --I had been expecting you."

As she spoke she seized his hands and pressed them tightly, her eyes eloquent with thankfulness. "Oh, I am so glad!" she whispered. Then she saw Ten Spot standing in the doorway and she ran over and seized his hands also, shaking them hysterically. And Ten Spot stood, red of face, grinning bashfully at her—like a big, awkward, embarrassed schoolboy.

"That's the first time I've ever been thanked for shootin' anybody!" he confided to Hollis, later. "An' it cert'nly did feel some strange!"

In spite of Hollis's remonstrances the girl insisted on returning to the interior of the cabin, to "bundle up her things." While she was busy in one of the rooms Hollis and Ten Spot carried Yuma's body outside, around to the rear of the cabin.

Then, when the girl had finally secured her "things" and they had been securely tied to her pony, and she had started down the trail toward the Circle Bar ranch, Hollis and Ten Spot returned to the rear of the cabin, took up Yuma's body, carried it to a secluded spot at some little distance from the cabin and there buried it deep and quickly.

"I want to thank you again," said Hollis as he and Ten Spot stood on the porch when Hollis was ready to depart; "it was a great stroke of luck that brought you here just when you were needed."

Ten Spot grinned. "I don't think it was just luck that brought me," he said; "though mebbe it was luck that took me into the Fashion this morning. Whatever it was, I was in there, an' I heard Dunlavey an' Yuma cookin' this here deal. I wasn't feelin' entirely ongrateful for the way you'd treated me after you'd got my gun that day in the *Kicker* office, so I got out of the Fashion as soon as I could an' trailed Yuma. I've been after him all day, but somehow or other I lost him an' didn't find out where he'd gone till a little while ago—when I heard a gun go off. Then I hit the breeze here—after Yuma. That's all." He stuck out a hand to Hollis. "Well, so-long," he said; "I'm hittin' the breeze out of the country."

"Then you're not going back to the Circle Cross—to work for Dunlavey?" questioned Hollis.

"Well, no," grinned Ten Spot. "You see, it might not be so pleasant now as it's been."

HOLLIS contemplated him gravely. "So you're going to leave the country? I don't imagine you are afraid——"

"Don't!" said Ten Spot coldly and sharply. Then he grinned with feline cordiality. "I reckon I ain't scared of anyone, but I ain't likin' to go back to the Circle Cross after puttin' Yuma out of business. I've done some mean things in my time, but I ain't dealin' double with no man, an' I couldn't go back to the Circle Cross an' work for Dunlavey when I ain't sympathizin' with him none."

"I'm shy of good cowhands," offered Hollis quietly. "If forty a month would be——"

Ten Spot's right hand was suddenly gripping Hollis's. "You've hired a man, boss!" he said, his eyes alight with pleasure.

"It's a bargain," laughed Hollis. "You can start right now." He pointed to the ridge upon which he had been riding when he heard the shot that had brought him to the cabin. "Some of Ed Hazelton's cattle are in the basin on the other side of that ridge," he said. "You go over there and keep an eye on them until I can get a chance to send some one here to help you drive them back up the river toward the Circle Bar." As he came to the edge of the porch to mount his pony his gaze fell on Yuma's horse, still hitched to one of the columns. "What are we going to do with Yuma's horse?" he questioned.

Ten Spot grinned. He walked over to the pony, unhitched it, and with a vicious slap on the flank sent it loping down the trail toward the river.

"That'll be my message to Dunlavey that Yuma ain't here any more," he said grimly.

Hollis mounted and rode a short distance, but halted and turned in the saddle when he heard Ten Spot call to him.

"Boss," he said with a grin, "I ain't exactly blind, an' mebbe you've got your eyes with you, too. But I saw that there Hazelton girl lookin' at you sorta—"

He saw a smile on Hollis's face, but the rest of his speech was drowned in a clatter of hoofs as the "boss's" pony tore down the Coyote trail. Then Ten Spot smiled, mounted his pony, and rode away toward the ridge.

CHAPTER XVI

OF course Yuma had been amply punished for his part in the attack on Nellie Hazelton, but there still remained Dunlavey—who had instigated it. Hollis was aware of the uselessness of bringing a charge against Dunlavey—he had not forgotten his experience with Bill Watkins when he had attempted to have Greasy brought to justice.

But he contemplated no immediate action. Besides the attack on Nellie Hazelton there was another score to settle with Dunlavey, and when the time came for a final accounting he told himself that he would settle both.

Therefore he remained silent regarding the incident, and except to Norton and his wife, Nellie Hazelton, Ten Spot, and himself, the disappearance of Yuma remained a mystery.

Dunlavey, perhaps, might have had his suspicions, but if so he communicated them to no one, and so as the days passed the mystery ceased to be discussed and Yuma was forgotten.

Hollis received a letter from Weary, dated "Chicago," announcing the safe arrival of himself and Ed Hazelton. "Town" suited him to a "T," he wrote. But Doctor Hammond would not operate at once—he wanted time to study the symptoms of Ed's malady. That was all. Hollis turned this letter over to Nellie, with another from Ed, addressed to her—whose contents remained a mystery to him.

Ben Allen had visited the small ranches in the vicinity. He confided to Hollis that he had "mixed a little politics with business," and then, after receiving a telegram from the Secretary of the Interior, had taken himself off to Santa Fé to confer with the governor.

After several days he returned. He entered the *Kicker* office to greet Hollis, his face wreathed in smiles.

"You've got 'em all stirred up, my boy!" he declared, placing his hand on Hollis's shoulder with a resounding "smack;" "they're goin' to enforce the little law we've got and they've passed some new ones. Here's a few! First and foremost, cattle stealing is to be considered felony! Penalty, from one to twenty years! Next—free water! Being as the rivers in this Territory ain't never been sold, any cattleman's got the right to water wherever he wants to. The governor told me that if it's necessary he'll send Uncle Sam's blue coats anywhere in the Territory to enforce that! Third: after a man's registered his brand he can't change it unless he applies to the district judge. I reckon there's trouble ahead for any man which monkeys with another man's brand!"

Allen's speech was ungrammatical, but its message was one of good cheer and Hollis's eyes brightened. The Law was coming at last!

"Did you happen to hear when these laws become effective?" he inquired.

"On the first day of October."

Hollis smiled. "And election day is the third of November," he said. "That gives Dunlavey, Watkins and Company a month's grace—in case you are elected sheriff."

Allen grinned. "They can't do a heap in a month," he said.

"No," returned Hollis, "but in most elections that have come under my observation, I have noticed that the winning candidate does not assume office for a considerable time after the election. What is the custom out here?"

ALLEN grinned grimly. "Usually it's two weeks," he said, "but if I'm elected it will be the next day—if I have to go down to the sheriff's office and drag Bill Watkins out by the hair!"

"That's swell," dryly observed Hollis. "Count me in on that little party. But there's another matter to be thought of—which we seem to have overlooked. Usually before an election there is a primary, or a convention, is there not?"

"There is," grinned Allen. "It's to-night, and I'm ready for it!" His grin expanded. "I told you that I'd been mixing a little politics with business," he said. "Well, I've done so." He got up and approached the front window of the office, sweeping a hand toward the street. "If you'll just get up and look out here," he said, "you'll see that I ain't lying. That gang which is mixing palaver in front of the Silver Dollar you'll mebbe notice that Lemuel Train is in it, an' Truxton, of the Diamond Dot, Holcomb, of the Star, Yeager, of the Three Diamond, Clark, of the Circle Y, Henningson, of the Three Bar, Toban, of the T Down, an' some more which has come in for the

racket to-night. Countin' 'em all—the punchers which have come in with the fellows I have named—there'll be about seventy-five.

"An', say!" he added, "there wouldn't a durn one of them have come over here on my account. They up an' told me so when I asked them. Said they'd nothin' ag'n me, but they wasn't considerin' votin' at all. But since Hollis wanted me—well, they'd come over just to show you that they appreciated what you'd done for them!"

Following the custom the primary was to be held in the sheriff's office. Watkins had issued a proclamation some weeks before; it had appeared on the door of the sheriff's office—a written notice, tacked to the door—but it had been removed the same day. But Hollis had been apprised of the appearance of the proclamation and had quietly proceeded to plant the seed of opposition to Watkins in the minds of his friends.

He had been warned by Judge Graney that Watkins would try to "pack" the sheriff's office with his friends on the night of the primary. This had been the usual method employed by Dunlavey when opposition to Watkins developed. Drunken, dissolute, dangerous men were usually on hand to overawe the opposition; the Judge told of instances in which gunplay had developed. But Hollis had determined that Watkins must be beaten.

Allen did not stay long in the *Kicker* office. Nor, for that matter, did Hollis. Once, during the morning, he went down to the court house to talk with Judge Graney. Then he returned to the *Kicker* office and worked until noon.

During the morning there had been a surprising influx of visitors. Bronzed punchers on dusty, drooping ponies rode down the town's one street, dropped from their saddles, and sought the saloons. Groups of them swarmed the streets and the stores. As Hollis walked down to his office after leaving the court house, he was kept busy nodding to friends—many of whom had become such during the later days of the drought.

At noon he went to the Alhambra for lunch. Almost the first person he saw there was Dunlavey. The latter grinned at him mockingly.

"Friends of yours in town to-day," he said with a sneer. You'll need them!"

His voice had been loud enough for all in the restaurant to hear. Hollis did not answer, though he appreciated the significance of Dunlavey's words; they told him that the Circle Cross manager was aware of the contemplated contest and was ready for it.

During the afternoon Dry Bottom presented a decidedly different appearance from the day when Hollis had first viewed it. Animation had succeeded desolation. Perhaps a hundred cow-ponies were hitched to the rails that paralleled the fronts of the saloons, the stores, and many of the private dwellings. Men swarmed the sidewalks; the saloons buzzed.

Toward dusk the volume of noise in the saloons drowned all sound outside. By the time the kerosene lamps were lighted in the saloons revelry reigned. From one saloon issued the shrieking, discordant notes of a violin, accompanied by the scuffling of feet; from another came laughter and the clinking of glasses; from still another came harsh oaths and obscene shouts. In the latter place rose the laughter of women.

SEATED at his desk near the front window of the *Kicker* office Hollis gravely watched the scene—listened to the sounds. In another chair sat Potter. As the revelry in the saloons increased the printer glanced furtively at his chief.

"There'll be hell to-night!" he said.

"I expect there'll be trouble," agreed Hollis.

Potter shifted uneasily in his chair, eyeing his employer with a worried expression. He was silent for a moment. Then he cleared his throat nervously.

"Do you intend to go there—to the sheriff's office—to-night?" he questioned.

Hollis looked quickly at him. "Of course!" he said with emphasis. "Why?" he interrogated.

"Nothing," returned Potter; "only——" he hesitated and then blurted out: "I wouldn't go if I were you. They've been saying that if you do there'll be trouble. You know what that means."

"Who has been saying that?" inquired Hollis.

"I heard it at noon—in the Silver Dollar. Some of Dunlavey's men sat near me and I heard them saying that Watkins was

to win if they had to put two or three of his chief opponents out of business."

"I've been expecting that," returned Hollis.

Shortly after dark there was a clatter of hoofs outside the *Kicker* office and four men dismounted from their ponies and strode to the office door. They were Norton, Ace, Lanky, and Bud. Evidently Hollis had been awaiting their coming, for he met them at the door, greeting them with the words: "We'll be going at once; it's about time."

Followed by Potter the five strode rapidly down the street. When they arrived at the sheriff's office there were a number of men congregated about the door. Inside a kerosene lamp flickered on a table that sat in the center of the room. Another lamp stood on Watkins' desk, and beside the desk sat Watkins himself.

Conversation died away as Hollis and his men approached the door and stood in the stream of light from the interior. A man stepped out of the shadow of the building and approached Hollis, drawing him and Norton aside. It was Allen.

"I've been waitin' for you," he said; "we're goin' to have a scrumptuous time. Dunlavey's planning to pack her." He swept a hand toward the interior of the office. "But each candidate is to be allowed two witnesses. I've selected you two. Dunlavey and Greasy are doing the honors for Watkins. We might just as well go inside; we can't do anything out here. There won't be anything done by any of this gang until Dunlavey says the word."

He turned and stepped into the sheriff's office, Hollis and Norton following.

Watkins looked up and surveyed them with a bland smile as they entered and dropped quietly into the several chairs that had been provided.

"I reckon she's goin' to be some hot tonight?" significantly remarked Watkins, addressing himself to Allen.

"Maybe," grinned Allen.

"We're goin' to take a hand in handlin' the Law," significantly remarked Norton.

Watkins' face reddened. He stared offensively at Hollis.

"I reckon you're a witness, too," he said, sneering. "Well," he went on as Hollis gravely nodded, "the law says that a witness to the count must be a resident of the county. An' I reckon you ain't. You ain't been——"

"He stays," interrupted Allen, shortly. "That's settled."

Watkins' face bloated with a sudden anger, but he wheeled without replying and gave his attention to some papers lying on the desk in front of him.

For a long time the four sat in silence Outside arose voices of men—growing in volume. Hollis could hear exclamations of impatience, though the majority of the men outside stood in silence, waiting.

Plainly, nothing was to be done until the arrival of Dunlavey. And presently he came.

He had not been drinking; he was undeniably sober and self-possessed. As he entered the door of the office there was a sudden surge on the part of the crowd—several of the men tried to force their way in behind Dunlavey. But he halted on the threshold, scowling back at them and uttering the one word: "Wait!" The crowd fell back at the command and watched.

DUNLAVEY stepped across the room, standing beside Watkins, his rapid glance noting the presence of the three members of the opposition. He ignored Hollis and Norton, speaking to Allen.

"So you're sure enough going to run?" he said.

"Sure" returned Allen. He rose slowly, stepped deliberately across the room, closed the door, and stood with his back to it.

"We're all here now," he said quietly, "and I want to talk a little. There ain't no one going to hear what I've got to say but them I'm going to say it to. I reckon that goes?" He turned to Dunlavey.

Dunlavey had shown some evidence of surprise over Allen's action in closing the door, but this immediately gave way to a sneer of mockery. "I reckon you've forgot Greasy," he said.

"Why, I sure have!" returned Allen evenly. He opened the door a trifle and called: "Greasy!"

Evidently Greasy had been waiting at the door, for he immediately came in, slouching across the floor and standing beside Watkins and Dunlavey. Allen closed the door and adjusted the fastenings carefully. Then he turned again to Dunlavey.

"Now we'll proceed to do the talking," he said. He walked over to the chair that

he had previously vacated, dropping carelessly into it and leaning comfortably back.

But once seated in his chair a startling change came over him. There was a rapid movement at his sides, a mere flash of light, and two heavy six-shooters appeared suddenly in his hands and lay there, unaimed, but forbiddingly ready. He sat erect, his eyes chilled and glittering, alert, filled with menace.

"Now," he said sharply, "the first man who peeps above a whisper gets his so plenty that he won't care a damn who's nominated for sheriff!" He spoke to Norton and Hollis without turning his head. "You two get whatever guns them gentlemen happen to have on them, standing to one side so's I can see to perforate anyone who ain't agreeable to handing them over."

Norton rose and approached Dunlavey, while Hollis stepped forward to the sheriff and secured the weapon that reposed in a holster at his right hip. He did likewise with Greasy. While Norton was relieving Dunlavey of his weapon the sheriff opened his lips to speak, his gaze fixed doubtfully on one of Allen's sixes.

"The law——" he began. But Allen interrupted with a grin.

"Sure," he said, "the law didn't figure on this. But I reckon you heard Big Bill say once that the law could be handled. I'm handling it now. But I reckon that lets you out—you ain't in on this and the mourners'll be after you to-morrow if you open your trap again!"

The sheriff swelled with rage, but he closed his lips tightly. When Hollis and Norton had completed their search for weapons and had laid the result of their search on the table near Allen they sought their chairs.

Dunlavey had said nothing. He stood beside Watkins's desk, still self-possessed.

Allen laughed grimly, quietly. "Sort of unexpected, wasn't it, Bill?" he said, addressing Dunlavey. "It ain't just the sort of politics that you've been used to. But I'm kind of used to it myself. Had to pull the same game off over in Colfax County when I was runnin' for sheriff the first time. It worked, too, because the folks that was mixed up in it knowed I wasn't ringing in any bluff." He looked at Dunlavey with a level, steady gaze, his eyes gleaming coldly. "If you think I'm bluffing now, chirp for some one of your plug-uglies to bust into this game. I'd sort of like to let off my campaign guns into your dirty gizzard!"

DUNLAVEY'S eyes gleamed as he looked at Allen. "I don't think you'd try to work any bluff on me, Allen," he said quietly. "You took me by surprise, that's a fact. But let's get down to business. What's your game?"

"I reckon that's a sensible way to look at it," returned Allen evenly. "That's the way I expected you'd look at it when you begun to realize that I was holding some pretty good cards. There ain't nothing personal in this; I'm out for a square deal and I'm going to get it. I want you to understand that I'm running this game tonight and I'm running it square. If I get enough votes I'm going to be the next sheriff. If I don't get enough votes Bill Watkins'll be it. But the votes are going to be real votes. I ain't figuring on letting your gang pack in here and keep my friends from voting.

"I'm going to put your hat on this table. Then Norton will open the door and let one man come in. That man will vote—for whoever he pleases. Then Mr. Hollis will let him out the back door and Norton will let another man in the front. There won't be any row. I'm telling you that you and Bill Watkins and Greasy are going to set here and watch the voting. I'm going to stand behind you with one of my guns tucked under your fifth rib. If you, or Watkins, or Greasy let out a yawp that can be construed as a signal for anyone to bust into the game, or if there's anything started by your friends which ain't your doing, I'm going to pump six chunks of lead into you so fast that they'll be playing tag with one another going through. I reckon you get me. That ends the palaver."

He arose, snatched Dunlavey's hat from his head, placed it on the table, and walked behind Dunlavey, standing against the wall.

"Open the door!" he directed, looking at Norton.

NORTON opened the door a trifle and called "One man at a time!" There were some hoarse shouts from without—presumably from Dunlavey's friends; a

chorus of derisive laughter from Allen's. Then the first man entered.

It was Ace. The puncher stood for an instant, blinking at the light, then he grinned as his gaze rested on the occupants of the room. He was directed how to cast his ballot. He took the piece of paper that was given him by Norton scrawled "Allen" across it with a pencil that Norton had previously placed on the table, and dropped the paper into Dunlavey's hat. Hollis opened the rear door for him, but he halted on the threshold, looking back into the room with a broad grin.

"Gawd A'mighty!" he said in an awed tone; "there must have been a wad of money blowed in in this here town today! Drunks! Man alive there ain't nothin' but drunks; the town's reelin' with 'em! They're layin' in the street; there's a dozen in the Silver Dollar an' that many more in the Fashion—an' Gawd knows how many more in the other saloons. Their heads is under the tables; they're hangin' on the walls an' clawin' around in spittoons —gle-or-i-ously, be-ut-i-fully paralyzed!"

He was suddenly outside, pushed through the door by Hollis, and the door closed after him. Hollis glanced furtively at Dunlavey to see that gentleman scowl. He smiled and gave his attention to the next man, who was now entering.

The latter proved to be Lemuel Train. He did his voting quietly and grimly. But as he went out through the door that Hollis opened for him he growled: "Lordy, what a drunken bunch!" He looked at Hollis. "One of your men, too," he said, grinning slightly.

Hollis frowned. He knew that Allen would need all his friends; none of them could be spared in this crisis. He smiled incredulously. It had been only a short time before that his men had accompanied him to the door of the sheriff's office. At that time they were perfectly sober. It would have been impossible for any of them—

"An' Ten Spot's a hummer when he gits started," Train was saying. "I've seen him before when he cut loose an' he sure is a holy terror!"

Then with a word of parting Train was gone.

Hollis was aware of an odd expression that had come into Dunlavey's eyes at the mention of Ten Spot. Had Dunlavey succeeded in bribing Ten Spot to desert him? He had left Ten Spot at the Circle Bar, not inviting him to Dry Bottom because he felt that the latter would rather not come since he had deserted Dunlavey. And Ten Spot had come to town anyway. What did it mean?

He frowned again, and for the next few minutes gravely studied Dunlavey's face. He was sure that the latter's manner had changed. Ten Spot—dangerous, reckless, drunk, at the head of a number of dissolute men, had it in his power to make things decidedly interesting should he advance on the sheriff's office with the intention of assisting Dunlavey.

Several times since hiring Ten Spot Hollis had doubted him. The suspicion had assailed him that perhaps the appearance of Ten Spot at the Hazelton cabin so opportunely had been a part of a plot by Dunlavey to place a spy in his employ. They might have purposely sacrificed Yuma.

During the next quarter of an hour he gave more attention to Dunlavey than to the steady stream of men that passed through the room.

Allen's spirits had risen during the last quarter of an hour. His maneuver had dissipated Dunlavey's strength and it was plain to be seen that a majority of the votes cast were for him. If nothing unusual or unexpected happened within the next hour, or until nine o'clock, the hour named in Watkins's proclamation for the closing of the polls, he was assured of victory.

Thoughts of the same character were passing through Hollis's mind. There was silence in the office. A man was voting at the table. Hollis consulted his watch. It lacked over an hour of the time for closing. The man at the table finished writing and tossed the paper into the hat. Hollis opened the rear door to allow him to go out. While the door remained open a sound floated in, which they all heard—an ear-splitting screech, followed instantly by a chorus of yells, a pistol report, more yells, and then a number of reports.

Norton did not open the door. He exchanged glances with Hollis and Allen. Dunlavey grinned widely.

"Something's coming," remarked Allen grimly.

Dunlavey's grin grew derisive. "It would sure be too bad if my friends should bust up this peace meeting," he sneered.

"There won't be nothin' spoiled," grim-

ly assured Allen. But he drew his other six-shooter.

THE sounds outside grew in volume as they swept toward the sheriff's office. They broke presently at the door and an ominous silence succeeded. Then a voice reached the interior—harsh authoritative —Ten Spot's voice.

"Open up, you damned shorthorns!" it said.

Norton looked at Allen. The latter's face was pale. "They come in," he directed, "like the others—one at a time."

Norton carefully withdrew the bar with which the door was fastened, swinging it open slightly. As he did so there was a sudden rush of bodies; Norton tried to jam the door shut, failed, and was flung back several steps by the surging, yelling crowd that piled tumultuously into the room.

There were perhaps twenty of them and as they surged into the room, shouting and cursing and laughing Hollis recognized among them many men that he had come to know by sight. They were of the reckless, lawless element upon which Dunlavey had relied for his support.

There was now no need to guard the door; the damage had been wrought, and Norton backed away, leaving the door ajar, pale, grim eyes, alert, ready to take an active part in the trouble which he felt certain was sure to develop. Something in the faces of the men who had come in with Ten Spot proclaimed trouble.

Allen had not moved. He still stood behind Dunlavey, but his weapons no longer menaced the Circle Cross manager; their muzzles, level and forbidding, were covering the other men.

Standing quietly beside the rear door, his face pale, his eyes bright, his lips in straight lines, Hollis watched closely as the visitors, having gained entrance, gathered together in the center of the room. They were not awed by Allen's weapons; they grinned hugely at him. One man, a young man of about Hollis's age, bronzed, lean, reckless of eye, and unmistakably under the influence of liquor, lunged forward to Allen and stood within arm's length of him, grinning at him.

"Two guns!" he said with a laugh. "Why, I reckon you'd make a hell of a sheriff!"

A chorus of laughter greeted the young cowboy's words. Dunlavey grinned widely. "You boys are just in time," he said.

There was another roar of laughter. Many of the men seemed only now to have become aware of Dunlavey's presence and they surged forward around him, disregarding Allen's guns. The latter seemed to realize that the situation had passed beyond his control, for catching Hollis's eye he smiled grimly and sheathed his weapons, seeking Hollis's side.

"It's no use," he said shortly to Hollis as he came near; "they'll run things to suit themselves now. I wasn't expectin' Ten Spot to butt into the game."

"I reckon they've got us." Norton had also sought Hollis's side and the three stood near the rear door, watching the crowd around Dunlavey. Hollis tried to catch Ten Spot's gaze but failed—the latter seemed studiously to avoid him.

A wave of dull anger surged through Hollis's veins. Until now the contest had been conducted fairly; they had given Dunlavey and Watkins an honest election, even though they had found it necessary to eliminate them as active participants. From now on he was assured the contest would be a joke—though a grim one. Casting caution aside he stepped forward and stood beside the table on which reposed the hat into which the ballots had been placed by the men who had previously voted. He intended to take personal charge of the hat, determined upon securing a fair deal in spite of the great odds.

As he stepped forward he saw Greasy grin maliciously and try to snatch a gun from the holster of a cowboy who stood near him. The puncher suddenly dropped his hand to his holster, where it closed upon Greasy's. He snarled, muttered profanely, and struck furiously at Greasy, knocking him down in a corner.

Other men moved. There were curses; the flashing of metal as guns came out. Hollis felt rather than saw Norton and Allen advance toward the table and stand beside him. A grim smile wreathed his face over the knowledge that in the crowd there were at least two men upon whom he might depend to the end—whatever the end might be.

HE heard Dunlavey snarl an oath, saw his big form loom out of the crowd,

saw one of his gigantic hands reach for the hat on the table.

"I reckon I'll take charge of this now!" he sneered, his face close to Hollis's.

Hollis would have struck the face that was so close to his, but at the instant he saw Dunlavey's hand reach out for the hat he saw another hand dart out from the other side of the table, seize the hat, and draw it out of Dunlavey's reach.

"I don't reckon that you'll take charge of her!" said a voice.

Hollis turned quickly. Over the table leaned Ten Spot, the captured hat in his hand, a big forty-five in the other, a cold, evil glitter in his eyes as he looked up at Dunlavey.

"I don't reckon that you're goin' to have a hand in runnin' this show a-tall, Bill," he sneered. "Me an' my friends come down here special to tend to that." He grinned the shallow, hard grin that marks the passing of a friendship and the dawn of a bitter hatred. "You see, Bill, me an' my friends has got sorta tired of the way you've been runnin' things an' we're shufflin' the cards for a new deal. This here tenderfoot which you've been a-slanderin' shameful is man's size an' we're seein' that he gits a fair shake in this here. I reckon you git me?"

Hollis felt Norton poking him in the ribs, but he did not turn; he was too intent upon watching the two principal actors in the scene. Dunlavey seemed stunned. He stood erect, passing his hand over his forehead. Several times his lips moved, but no words came and he turned, looking about at the men who were gathered around him, scanning their faces for signs that would tell him that they were not in sympathy with Ten Spot. But the faces that he looked upon wore mocking grins and sneers.

"An' I've been tellin' the boys how you set Yuma on Nellie Hazelton, an' they've come to the conclusion that a guy which will play a low down mean game like that on a woman ain't no fit guy to have no hand in any law makin'."

Ten Spot's voice fell coldly and metallically in the silence of the room. Slowly recovering from the shock Dunlavey attempted a sneer, which gradually faded into a mirthless smile as Ten Spot continued:

"An' you ain't goin' to have a hand in any more law-makin' in this man's town. Me an' my friends is goin' to see to that, an' my boss, Mr. Hollis. I reckon that'll be about all. You don't need to hang around here while we do the rest of the votin'. Watkins an' Greasy c'n stay to see that everything goes on regular." He grinned wickedly as Dunlavey stiffened. "I reckon you know me, Bill. I ain't palaverin' none. You an' Ten Spot is quits!"

He stepped back a little, away from the table, his teeth showing in a mocking grin. Then he looked down at the hat which he still held in his hand—Dunlavey's hat. He laughed. "Why, I'm cert'nly unpolite!" he said insinuatingly. "Here you've been wantin' to go an' I've been keepin' your hat!" He dumped the ballots upon the table and passed the hat to Dunlavey. Without a word Dunlavey took it, jerking it savagely, placed it on his head, and strode to the door, stepping down into the street.

There was a short silence. Then Ten Spot turned and looked at Hollis, his face wreathed in a broad grin.

"I reckon you-all think you know somethin' about handlin' the law," he said, "but your little Ten Spot ain't exactly the measliest card in the deck! We'll do our votin' now."

A quarter of an hour later, after Ten Spot and his friends had cast their ballots and Watkins had been forced to make out a certificate of nomination,—which reposed safely in Ben Allen's inside pocket—the kerosene lights were extinguished and the men filed out. Hollis and Ten Spot were the last to leave. As they stood for a moment on the threshold of the doorway Hollis seized Ten Spot's hand and gripped it heartily.

"I want to thank you," he said earnestly.

Ten Spot jerked his hand away. "Aw, hell!" he said as they sought the darkness of the street, "I ain't mushin' none. But," he added, as a concession to his feelings, "I reckon to know a white man when I see one!"

CHAPTER XVII.

IT was Sunday afternoon and a hazy, golden, late September sun was swimming lazily in the blue arc of sky, flooding the lower gallery of the Circle Bar ranchhouse, but not reaching a secluded nook in which sat Hollis and Nellie Hazelton. Mrs. Norton was somewhere in the house and Norton had gone down to the bunkhouse for a talk with the men—Hollis

and Nellie could see him, sitting on a bench in the shade of the eaves, the other men gathered about him.

Below the broad level that stretched away from the ranchhouse sank the big basin, sweeping away to the mountains. Miles into the distance the Circle Bar cattle could be seen—moving dots in the center of a great, green bowl.

Hollis turned his head slightly and looked at the girl who sat beside him. She was looking out over the basin, her eyes filled with a light that thrilled him. He felt the unaccountable, indefinable something, a feeling that men have tried to explain for centuries——

Two weeks of inaction had followed the primary incident. Several of Ten Spot's friends were now in his employ; in spite of the drought the Circle Bar had so far experienced a very prosperous season, and, though the addition of the men represented quite an item of expense, he felt it was much better to employ them than to allow them to be re-engaged by Dunlavey.

He had been able to save considerable money. This he had transferred to a bank in Santa Fé, for he had determined to stay in the West.

Hollis was satisfied. Affairs were progressing beyond his anticipations. Dunlavey's influence in the county had received a mighty blow in the defeat of Watkins at the primary; he had succeeded in winning many friends because of his attitude on the water question; the increased number of advertisements appearing in the *Kicker* would soon necessitate the addition of an extra sheet. It all presaged prosperity. Yes, he was satisfied. And yet—

He turned again and looked at the girl. This time he caught her watching him. Evidently she had been watching him for a long time for her gaze was fixed and meditative, as though she had been studying him. She started and looked down when he turned and caught her. But she looked up again instantly, meeting his gaze steadily.

"You have been thinking of this country," she said.

"You have guessed it," he returned gravely, "I have been thinking of this country—and its people. But how did you discover that?" he questioned. "I was not aware that I had been speaking my thoughts."

"Do you think it is always necessary to speak?" she answered, looking at him with a quiet smile. "Don't you think there are times when one's thoughts find expression in one's eyes? I know you were thinking of the country," she went on earnestly, "because a few moments ago I had been thinking of it too and I know that my emotions were exactly the same as those expressed in your eyes."

"Yes," he said, "but I was thinking of the people also."

"Oh, the people!" she said with a frown.

"Perhaps I should have said 'person'," he modified with a quick glance at her.

"Oh!" she said merely.

Her eyes met his in a glance of swift comprehension. She drew a slow, deep breath.

She was looking straight at him, meeting his gaze unwaveringly, a slight smile on her face. "I told you that sometimes a person's thoughts were expressed in their eyes," she said, "perhaps you can tell what my thoughts are?"

It was a challenge, a defiance, and an unconditional surrender. Like a flash one of Hollis's arms went out—she was drawn, vainly protesting, toward him.

"You haven't answered," she laughed, in a smothered voice; "you are not certain—"

She did not finish the sentence. Mrs. Norton, coming to the door for a breath of fresh air, halted on the threshold, looked, smiled, and then quietly—very quietly—slipped back into the house.

Away out over the basin a Mexican eagle circled, winging his slow way through the golden sunshine of the afternoon. Miles away the mountain peaks rose somberly, a mysterious, golden halo rising slowly above them. The gods were very kind this day.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE letter that Hollis received from Weary, late in September, read as follows:

"Deer Boss:

"This here town aint fit for no man to live in which thinks anythink of hisself, in the first place theres two many folks here which dont seem to know what to do with themselves they just keep millin around an actin like they was ready to stampead any time. In the 2nd place im runnin shy of dust an id admire for to receave about a months pay which i wont

charge two you bein as ive already spent more than i ought two its a good thing i got a return ticket or id be in a hell of a fix when i got ready to come back last nite the doctor at the hospittle said hed operate on ed today which hes already done this mornin an eds restin easy though the doc dont know whether hes goin to get well or not but hes hopin an ile let you know by telegraph if he gits any worse which is all for this time.

"P. S. say boss dont forget to hustel that coin ile shure make it right with you i forgot to tell you that i got cleaned out by a card sharper here i would have tore him apart but about a million sheriffs piled onto me an i dident have no chancst what in hell does any town need with so many sheriffs.

"Weary.

"P. S. id like to be home for the round-up but i reckon i won't make it.

"Weary."

Nellie Hazelton did not see this letter, though Hollis told her that Ed had been operated on and that he was doing as well as could be expected. And the telegraph that night flashed Weary's "coin" to him.

The days passed all too quickly now, for the time for the fall round-up was at hand and Hollis realized with regret that his daily rides—with Nellie Hazelton as a companion—must soon be discontinued.

The nights had already grown cool; snow had appeared on the mountain peaks; the basin was no longer a great green bowl, but resembled a mammoth, concave palette upon which nature had mixed her colors—yellow and gold and brown.

With the last day of the month came a rain—a cold, bitter, driving storm that raged for three days and started a drift that the cattlemen could not stop. Arrayed in tarpaulins the cowboys went forth, suffering, cursing, laboring heroically to stem the tide. The cattle retreated steadily before the storm—no human agency could halt them. On the second day Norton came into the Circle Bar ranchhouse, wet, disgusted, but fighting mad.

"If this damn rain don't stop pretty soon," he told Hollis as he dried himself before the open fireplace, "we'll have cattle down here from over the Colorado line. An' then there'll be hell to pay!"

But on the third day the rain ceased and the sun came out. The country lay smiling in the sunshine, mellow, glistening, inviting. But the damage had been wrought. From Lemuel Train of the Pig Pen outfit, came word that fifty per cent of his cattle were missing. Truxton of the Diamond Dot, Henningson of the Three Bar, and nearly all of the other small owners, reported losses. Of course the cattle would be recovered during the fall roundup, but they were now scattered and fair prey for cattle thieves, and with the round up still two weeks away it seemed that many must be stolen.

Yet there was nothing that could be done; it is folly to attempt to "cut out" cattle on the open range.

From the editorial columns of the *Kicker* might be gleaned the fact that the Law had come into Union County. Many men of Dry Bottom entered the *Kicker* office to thank Hollis; others boldly draped their houses with flags and bunting.

DUNLAVEY had visited Dry Bottom twice since the incident of the primary. He had said nothing concerning the incident to anyone save possibly his intimates, but it was plain that he intended continuing the fight.

Hollis had been compelled to record in the *Kicker* the unpleasant news that Dunlavey had refused to comply with the new law regulating brands and the submitting of lists for taxation, and also that he had threatened to shoot the first officer trespassed on his land. Dunlavey had not complied with the law, but he had failed to carry out his threat to "shoot the first officer that trespassed on his land," for Allen had trespassed several times, openly and boldly. Moreover, Dunlavey had seen him, had even spoken to him, but had offered no violence.

Perhaps in a calmer mood Dunlavey had decided not to use his weapon; perhaps there was something about the quiet, cool, and deliberate Allen which convinced Dunlavey that the former might be able to give a good account of himself in the event of trouble. At any rate several times Allen had ridden the Circle Cross range unmolested by either Dunlavey or his men. He explored the farthest limits of the Circle Cross property, tallying the cattle, nosing around the corrals, examining brands, and doing sundry other things not calculated to allay Dunlavey's anger over this new and odd condition of affairs.

Then one day he failed to visit the Circle Cross. Instead, he appeared to Potter in the office of the *Kicker* with copy for a poster announcing the sale by auction of a

thousand of Dunlavey's best cattle. He ordered Potter to print it so that he might post copies throughout the county within a week. The night following the issue of the *Kicker* containing the announcement concerning the coming of the law, Potter had informed Hollis that he had that day delivered the notices to Allen.

HOLLIS had demonstrated the fact that a majority of Dry Bottom's citizens welcomed the law. Dry Bottom had had a law, to be sure—the law of the six-shooter, with the cleverest man "on the trigger" as its chief advocate. Few men cared to appear before such a court with an argument against its jurisdiction. But now things had changed. The Law had come.

Even the evil element knew it. In a dozen conspicuous places were posted flaring, printed notices, informing the reader that a thousand of the Circle Cross cattle —a description of which followed—were, on the following day, to be sold to the highest bidder. Below this announcement, in small print, was quoted the Law.

Dry Bottom gasped. The reckless element—the gun-men who in a former day were wont to swagger forth with reckless disregard for the polite conventions—skulked in the background, sneering at this thing which had come to rob them of their power and which, they felt, presaged their ultimate downfall.

But Dry Bottom ignored the gun-men, or smiled blandly at them, giving its attention to Ben Allen's posters and discussing a rumor which had gained rapid credence, to the effect that the new governor had telegraphed Allen that he would hold a detail of United States soldiers in readiness for any contingency.

The good citizens smiled. And throughout the day many of them passed and repassed the *Kicker* office, anxious to get a glimpse of the man who had been instrumental in bringing about this innovation.

Shortly after noon on the same day Dunlavey rode into Dry Bottom, dismounted, hitched his pony to the rail in front of the Fashion, and entered.

In former days Dunlavey's appearance within the doors of the Fashion was the signal for boisterous greetings. To-day, however, there were no greetings. Upon Dunlavey's entrance a silence—strange and awkward—fell in the bar-room. There were short nods and men fell away from Dunlavey as he crossed the room and came to a halt before one of Ben Allen's posters. He read every line of it—every word. No man interrupted him. Then, finishing his reading, he turned and faced the crowd, his face white with wrath, his lips snarling.

"Why in hell didn't some of you damned fools tear this down?" he demanded.

Silence greeted his query. He watched the crowd for an instant, sneering, his eyes glittering menacingly. Then he suddenly turned, seized the poster, savagely tore it into pieces and hurled the pieces to the floor. Then he turned again to the silent crowd, his face inflamed, his voice snapping with a bitter, venomous sarcasm.

"Scared!" he said. "Scared out clean—like a bunch of coyotes runnin' from the daylight!

"Quit!" he grated. "Quit clean because a tenderfoot comes out here and tries to run things! So long as things come your way you're willing to stick it out, but when things go the other way—Ugh!"

He turned abruptly, strode out through the door, mounted his pony, and rode rapidly down the street. Several of the men, who went to the door after his departure, saw him riding furiously toward the Circle Cross.

Then one of his former friends laughed harshly—sarcastically. "I reckon that there tenderfoot is botherin' Big Bill a whole lot," he said as he turned to the bar.

IT had been a busy day for Hollis. His hand had been shaken so much that it pained him. The day had been a rather warm one for the season and so when late in the afternoon Norton rode into town, "To see the excitement," he told Hollis, the latter determined to make the return trip to the Circle Bar within the evening.

There was a good moon; the air was invigorating, though slightly chill, and the Coyote Trail lay clear and distinct before them, as they jogged quietly toward the Circle Bar.

They had been riding through a deep depression, going toward a ridge whose crest was fringed with dense, tangled shrubbery. Norton suddenly drew himself erect in the saddle and pulled his pony abruptly up.

Surprised, Hollis also reined in and sat silent, looking at Norton.

The latter's hand went to one of his ears, the fingers spreading out, fan like. "Listen!" he warned sharply.

Hollis had been listening. A low rumble greeted his ears. He looked suddenly upward at the sky, fearful that another storm, such as he had encountered months before, might be forming. But the sky was cloudless. He looked again at Norton. The latter's eyes shone brightly in the moonlight, as he leaned toward Hollis. The rumbling had grown more distinct.

"It ain't a stampede," said Norton rapidly; "there wouldn't be anything to stampede cattle on a night like this. An' them's cattle!"

It was about a hundred yards to the ridge toward which they had been riding and Hollis saw Norton suddenly plunge the spurs into his pony's flanks; saw the animal rush forward. He gave his own animal the spurs and in an instant was at Norton's side, racing toward the ridge. The range boss dismounted at the bottom, swiftly threw the reins over his pony's head, and ran stealthily toward the crest. Hollis followed him. When he reached Norton's side the latter was flat on a rim rock at the edge of a little cliff, behind some gnarled brush. Below them the country stretched away for miles, level, unbroken, basking in the moonlight.

Looking out upon the plain Hollis held his breath in amazement. During the time he had been at the Circle Bar he had seen cattle running, but never had he seen them run like this. About a quarter of a mile from the ridge on which he and Norton stood rose a dust cloud—moving swiftly. But ahead of the cloud, heads down, their horns tossing were a number of cattle, perhaps fifty, racing furiously. They were running parallel with the ridge and would probably pass it. Behind and flanking them raced several cowboys, silent, driving with their quirts.

"Rustlers!" came Norton's voice from beside him. "They're headin' for Big Elk!"

Hollis had brought his rifle, which he had carried since the attack on the night of the storm. At Norton's word he raised it. But Norton's hand touched his and his voice came again, sharply, commandingly.

"Don't shoot!" he said. "It wouldn't do any good; some of them would get away. Mebbe they'll come close enough so's we can see who they are!"

HOLLIS waited breathlessly. It seemed that but an instant had passed from the time he had caught a first glimpse of them until they were thundering by the ridge and he and Norton were blinded by the dust. They had gone before the dust settled, but through it as they passed, Hollis had caught sight of a familiar figure. Before the thunder of hoofs had died away Hollis felt Norton's hand on his arm and his voice in his ear.

"Dunlavey!"

There could be no doubt of that, for Hollis had recognized him also. He turned, to hear Norton's dry voice in his ear.

"The new law don't seem to be botherin' Dunlavey a heap," he said.

Hollis stepped boldly out on the ridge, his face grim and pale. But he was pulled back by Norton. "I take it you don't want to let them see you," he said. "When a thing like that comes off there's always somebody sure to be lookin' back." He was pulling at Hollis's arm, directing his steps down the slope toward where they had left the horses. "You an' me ain't enough," he was saying to Hollis; "we'll hit the breeze to the Circle Bar, get some of the boys, an' hustle back here an' take them cattle!"

Hollis accompanied him willingly as far as the horses. Then he halted, his eyes flashing brightly. "We won't go to the Circle Bar," he said. "We won't fight them like that. There is a law in this country now and I am going to see that the law acts!" He seized Norton's arm in a firm commanding grip. "You follow them," he directed. "From the edge of the butte where they caught me on the night of the storm you can see the country for miles. Don't cross the river," he warned. "Stay there beside the butte until I come back—I won't be long. Watch where they take the cattle!"

Before Norton could offer a word of objection he was on his pony and racing over the back trail at terrific speed. For a moment Norton watched him. Then he disappeared and Norton grimly mounted his pony and rode down to the level, following the trail taken by the thieves.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ARM OF THE LAW

THE lights in Dry Bottom's saloons were flickering brightly when Hollis rode down the street and dismounted from his drooping pony in front of the court house. He ran stiffly around the side of the building and knocked loudly on a door. There was a short silence and then a movement inside and Ben Allen stuck his head out of a window. He saw at a glance the upward turned face of his visitor and called shortly: "Wait! I'll be down!"

There was a short wait, during which Hollis impatiently paced back and forth and then Allen appeared in the door, fully dressed. Judge Graney, in a night shirt, stood behind him.

"Something's up," drawled Allen as he stepped down from the door, "or you wouldn't come around disturbing folks this way. What is it?"

Hollis briefly related the events of the night, concluding with the statement that he was determined to force the law to act.

"Correct!" laughed Allen. "She's got to act now." He caught Hollis's arm and turned him toward a small cottonwood grove about half a mile distant. A dozen white objects dotting the grove caught Hollis's gaze. He started.

"Soldiers!" he exclaimed.

"I might say that was a good guess," drawled Allen. "I sent for them because I thought I might need them if our friend Dunlavey got to cuttin' up any."

"But you can't use them in this case," remarked Judge Graney, who had stepped down beside the two men. "The governor's instructions were that they should be used merely as an instrument in enforcing the court's order regarding the sale of Dunlavey's cattle. The theft of the Circle Bar cattle is a matter which comes directly under the jurisdiction of the sheriff. If he refuses to act——"

"Hell!" broke in Allen. "We know he won't do anything!"

The Judge smiled slightly. "I suspect he won't," he said dryly. He winked at Hollis. "Being a judge in this district I am, of course, averse to advising any infractions of the law. But if I were not a judge I would suggest that two strong, energetic men—such as you appear to be——" He leaned forward and whispered in Allen's ear, whereat that gentleman let out a joyous whoop and almost dragged Hollis around the corner of the building toward the street, leaving the Judge standing in the doorway.

Once on the street Allen set a pace that brought the two to the door of the sheriff's office quickly. A light shone through the window and when Allen opened the door Watkins was sitting beside his desk, gravely fumbling a deck of cards. He dropped them when he saw his visitors and made a quick movement with his right hand toward his revolver. But Allen's weapon was already out.

"Bill," he said in a soft, even voice, "we're wantin' a warrant for the arrest of Bill Dunlavey. The charge is stealin' cattle. Of course you'll issue it," he added insinuatingly.

Watkins's face slowly paled. "Why——" he began.

"Of course I knowed you wouldn't do it when I asked you," said Allen with a dangerously soft smile. "That's why I come down here. This town's got a sheriff an' it ain't. I wouldn't care a damn if it didn't have you. There's lots of folks wouldn't care either. So that if you're one of them which does care you're settin' right still an' not sayin' anything which can be construed as talk till my friend here goes down to the station." He whispered to Hollis. "Be middlin' rapid," he said aloud afterward, "an' use my name." He turned to Watkins with a smile. "While we're waitin' I'll do some talkin'," he said. "But if you let out one little wee chirp them folks which don't care about you bein' sheriff of this man's town will sure have a heap of cause to rejoice."

Hollis was already far down the street toward the station. When he got there the station was dark—evidently the agent had gone to bed. Hollis pounded heavily on the door and presently the agent opened it, appearing in his night shirt, a heavy six-shooter in hand, his eyes blinking.

"It's Hollis," said the latter from the darkness; "I want you to telegraph the governor."

"Come in." The agent disappeared within, Hollis following. "This way," he directed, as he disappeared through another door leading into the station, his night shirt flapping about his lean legs. "What you wantin' to telegraph?" he questioned, as he seated himself before the in-

strument and looked up at Hollis. And then, before the latter could answer he continued: "You're the durndest man to stir up a muss I ever seen in my life!"

Hollis smiled grimly as he seized a blank and wrote his message to the governor:

"Cattle thieves caught red-handed. Sheriff refuses to act. Crisis. Suggest you appoint me temporarily.

"BEN ALLEN."

The agent took the message, read it, and then monotonously began to drum on the keys of his instrument.

HOLLIS found it impossible to sit still and so he nervously paced up and down the room during the sending of the message. The agent finished and leaned his head sleepily on the table.

"Ought to answer in half an hour—if he's home," he informed Hollis. Upon which Hollis slipped out of the door and returned down the street to the sheriff's office, peering within. Watkins still sat at the table and in a chair near him lounged Allen, talking volubly. Hollis watched for a time and then returned to the station to find the agent asleep beside his instrument. Hollis had scarcely awakened him when the sounder began its monotonous ticking. He leaned over the agent's shoulder and read the governor's answer as the agent sleepily wrote it down.

"Ben Allen: You are hereby appointed sheriff of Union County in place of W. Watkins, dismissed. Have Judge certify."

"I reckon there must be somethin' goin' on," remarked the agent. "What's the matter with Bill——"

But Hollis had snatched the message from his hand and was out into the street in an instant and running down toward the sheriff's office. When he arrived there Allen was still talking. He passed the telegram to him and the latter rose to his feet and smiled at Watkins, shoving the message under his nose.

"You can read her," he said. "Then you can go home an' quit sheriffin'—after I've got through with you. You've been called down to the court house. I'm takin' you, chargin' you with bein' an accessory before the fact, or somethin' like that. It don't make no difference what it is, you're goin' with me." His voice came sharp and chill: "Jump!"

Judge Graney had dressed himself by the time the three arrived at the court house and Watkins was roughly tumbled into the room which had been set aside as the jail. Then the judge led Hollis and Allen into the court room where he issued Allen's certificate of appointment.

"Now, I reckon we won't have no trouble in gettin' the soldiers," he grinned. "This sheriff is goin' to act!"

AT three o'clock in the afternoon Hollis closed his desk and announced to Potter that he was going to the Circle Bar. Potter watched him with a fond smile as he went out the door and placed the saddle on his pony, mounted and rode into the sunshine of the afternoon. The presence of the troopers in town had created a sensation and most of the town's citizens were gathered about the court house, curiously watching Dunlavey and several of his men who had been taken into custody during the early hours of the morning. Neither Hollis or Norton had been allowed to participate in the final scene, the captain informing them curtly that the presence of civilians at what promised to be a free-for-all fight was strictly forbidden. And so Norton had returned to the Circle Bar, while Hollis had gone to Dry Bottom to finish an article for the next issue of the *Kicker*.

It had been in that bald, gray time between darkness and dawn when Ben Allen and Hollis, riding at the head of the detail of troopers beside the captain, had arrived at the edge of the butte where Hollis had directed Norton to await his coming.

Norton's only comment upon seeing the troopers had been: "Where in hell did they come from?"

He told Allen that he had watched where Dunlavey and his men had driven the cattle, and that he would find them concealed in a narrow defile between two hills about a mile on the other side of the Rabbit-Ear. He and Hollis had announced their intention to accompany the troop to the scene, but had been refused permission by the captain.

The capture of the thieves had been quite a simple matter. In single file the troopers had descended the slope of the river, crossed a shallow, and clattered up the other side. A mile dash at a gallop had brought them to one end of the defile mentioned by Norton, and in a grove of fir-balsam the cap-

tain had deployed his troopers and swooped suddenly down into the defile, surprising several men, who with Dunlavey, were busily at work altering the brands on the cattle they had stolen. There was a fire near the center of the defile, with branding irons scattered about it.

Proof of Dunlavey's guilt had been absolute. He had made some resistance, but had been quickly overpowered by Allen and the troopers. Then with their prisoners the troops had returned to Dry Bottom.

HOLLIS rode slowly toward the Circle Bar. He was tired—dead tired. When he arrived at the Hazelton cabin the shade on the porch looked so inviting that he dismounted, tied his pony to one of the slender porch columns, and seated himself, leaning wearily against the column to which he had tied his pony.

He sat there long, staring at a clump of nondescript weed that fringed the edge of the arroyo near the cabin, his thoughts filled with pictures of incidents that had occurred to him during his stay in the West. Nellie Hazelton appeared in every one of these pictures and therefore he smiled often.

He filled and lighted his pipe, smoking placidly as he leaned against the slender column, his gaze shifting to a clump of dense shrubbery that skirted the trail within twenty feet of the cabin.

During the past few days he had given much thought to Dunlavey. He was thinking of the man now.

He felt a certain contempt for the man, who tried to live by the outmoded theory of "Might is Right." But might could never be right in this country. Dunlavey must learn this lesson; he could not hope to—!

Hollis sat suddenly erect, putting aside his pipe and his ruminations at the same instant, the languor gone from him, his eyes narrowing coldly.

For suddenly, from behind the shrubbery that skirted the edge of the trail, had appeared the man about whom he had been thinking! It was evident that he had not come upon Hollis unexpectedly. He reined in his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, his face white, his eyes alight with passion.

For an instant neither man spoke. Hollis drew a deep breath and got to his feet, a grim smile on his face. He stepped off the porch and stood by one of the columns, watching Dunlavey closely. As he watched the grim smile on his face slowly faded, his lips curled bitterly, his eyes chilled.

"I suppose you've come to collect that thrashing?" he said.

Dunlavey dismounted quickly, his right hand flew to his holster, drawing his revolver. He came toward Hollis crouching, a cold, merciless glitter in his eyes.

"Yes, you lousy tenderfoot," he snarled, "I've come to collect, from behind this six-gun!"

FROM the moment of Hollis's arrival at the court house the night before Ben Allen had been constantly in action. It was late in the morning when he had returned to the court house with his prisoners. The men who had been captured with Dunlavey were still with the troopers, there not being sufficient room at the court house for them. Watkins had been released and Dunlavey had taken his place in the little room that answered for a jail. Shortly before noon Allen proceeded to the station, where he telegraphed to the governor the story of the capture. Then, tired and hungry, Allen sought the Alhambra and ate a hearty meal.

Dry Bottom was swarming with visitors that had come in for the sale of Dunlavey's cattle. But by the time Allen had finished eating the exodus had begun. The trail leading to the Circle Cross ranch was dotted with probable bidders, curiosity seekers, idlers, and mere residents of the town. Now that the law had come there were many who discovered that their sympathies had always been with the men who had championed it. Allen found his way to the court house strewn with men who halted him to express their good will. Many people gathered in front of the *Kicker* office, eager for a glimpse of Hollis.

Arriving at the court house Allen looked in at Dunlavey to find him lying on the floor, apparently asleep. Allen did not disturb him. He went out, threw the saddle on his pony, and rode over to the grove where the soldiers were quartered, talking long with the captain. At two o'clock he returned to the court house to be greeted with the news that Dunlavey had escaped. Allen did not stop to inquire how the escape had been accomplished. He remounted his pony and raced down to the *Kicker* office,

fearing that Dunlavey had gone there. Potter informed him that his chief had departed for the Circle Bar fully an hour and a half before. He had taken the Coyote trail—Potter had watched him.

Allen wheeled his pony and returned to the court house. He was met at the door by Judge Graney. The latter's face was white and drawn with fear.

"He's gone to kill Hollis!" the judge told him through white, set lips. "I heard him threaten Hollis this morning and a moment ago a man told me that he had seen Dunlavey, not over fifteen minutes ago, riding out the Coyote trail at a dead run!"

Allen's own face whitened. He did not stop to answer but drove the spurs deep into his pony's flanks and rode furiously down the street toward a point near the *Kicker* office where he struck the trail.

The distance to the Circle Bar ranch was ten miles and Dunlavey had fifteen minutes' start! He fairly lifted his pony over the first mile, hoping against hope that he could arrive at the Circle Bar in time to prevent Dunlavey from carrying out his design to kill Hollis. No, he told himself as he rode, he could not prevent the killing of Hollis, but he promised himself that Dunlavey should not escape punishment for the deed.

Following the trail over the broken-up country, it was impossible for Allen to see more than one hundred yards ahead. As he rode, he had no way of telling whether or not he was gaining on Dunlavey.

He had been riding for more than a half hour and was coming up out of a little gulley when he came upon a riderless pony grazing near a clump of shrubbery. He recognized it instantly as Dunlavey's. Dismounting before his pony stopped running, he ran over to the Circle Cross animal and noticed that the beast was still sweating and heaving from the exertions of the past half hour.

Allen's face whitened—he had probably arrived too late. But he would not be too late to wreak vengeance upon Hollis's killer.

Through the shrubbery he saw the roof of a cabin. Like a madman, he tore through the brush, drawing both his guns as he ran. Breaking into the clearing surrounding the cabin, he stopped, his mouth agape with surprise. There, standing with his back against one of the porch posts, was Hollis, and facing him, hurling vile epithets at him, was Dunlavey, six-shooter in hand.

The rustler chief turned, startled by the crashing of the brush. His big jaw slacked open. He asked no questions; he said no words. He thumbed a fast shot at the approaching sheriff. Allen grunted as a slug ripped through the muscle of his left arm, deadening it. But Ben Allen had been under fire before. He sidestepped as another bullet whistled harmlessly past him, and then his right hand gun spat. One bullet. But one was enough. Dunlavey's smoking gun dropped from his hand and a look of incredulity spread over his face.

"I," he started to say. "I——" and then like an accordion that has had the air taken from it, he slowly folded up, dead when he hit the ground.

CHAPTER XX

FROM where Hollis and Nellie Hazelton sat on the ridge they could look miles down the Coyote trail, into Devil's Hollow; could see the two big cottonwood trees that stood beside Big Elk crossing, above which, on the night of the storm, Hollis had been attacked by Dunlavey's men. Back on the stretch of plain above the basin they could make out the Circle Bar buildings, lying close to the banks of the river.

It was in the late afternoon and the sun had gone down behind the Blue Peaks, though its last rays were just touching the crest of the ridge near them. Hollis had called Nellie's attention to the sinking sun, telling her that it was time they started for the Circle Bar.

"Wait," she said; "someone is coming up the Coyote trail. I have been watching him for ten minutes."

Hollis faced the trail and watched also. In a quarter of an hour the horseman came out of Devil's Hollow. Hollis and Nellie could see him plainly as he guided his pony around the huge boulders that filled the place. Hollis smiled.

"It's Ace," he told Nellie. "I sent him to Dry Bottom this noon for the mail—Potter is going to stay in town over night."

For an instant it seemed that Ace would not see them, and Hollis rose from the rock on which he had been sitting and halloed to him. He responded with a shout

and urged his pony up the steep side of the slope and then along the crest until he came within a few feet of where they sat He dismounted and came forward, grinning broadly.

"Takin' the view?" he questioned. His eyes twinkled. "Sometimes there's a heap of poetry could be got out of this county."

"I suppose you got the mail?" interrupted Hollis, grimacing at him.

"I sure did," returned the cowboy, "one letter. Here it is." He passed an envelope to Hollis, and the latter, with a quick glance at the legend in the upper left hand corner, tore it open and read. It was from Weary.

Dear boss i got cleaned out agin what did you send me a hundred dollars for you might have knowed that id make a gol darned fool of myself with so much coin i never could keep no coin no how but its all right anyway cause me an eds comin home tomorrow eds all right except bein a little week which the doc says he git over in a littel while.

ta ta.

WEARY.

P. S. i might have telegraphed but ed says it dont make no difference cause the letter will git there quick enough any way an hes afraid a telegram will scare some one. im dam glad i got a return ticket.

WEARY.

After reading the letter Hollis passed it over to Nellie, watching her, his eyes alight with satisfaction.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh!" The letter dropped from her hand, was caught by the breezes and swirled several feet distant. Ace sprang to recover it. When he turned, the letter in hand, he saw something that brought a huge grin of sympathy to his face. But mingled with the sympathy was another emotion.

"Boss," he said, as Hollis, disengaging himself, turned and faced him. "I reckon I'm going to become a poet and write a poem on 'Love.' Mebbe you'd like to——"

HE caught Hollis's frown and immediately retreated to his pony, his grin broadening as he went. He cackled with mirth as Hollis's voice reached him.

"Ace," it said gravely, "don't attempt to write a poem on 'Love' until you've had some experience."

"You havin' yours now?" insinuated Ace, as he mounted his pony.

He alone caught Hollis's reply. It was an expressive wink.

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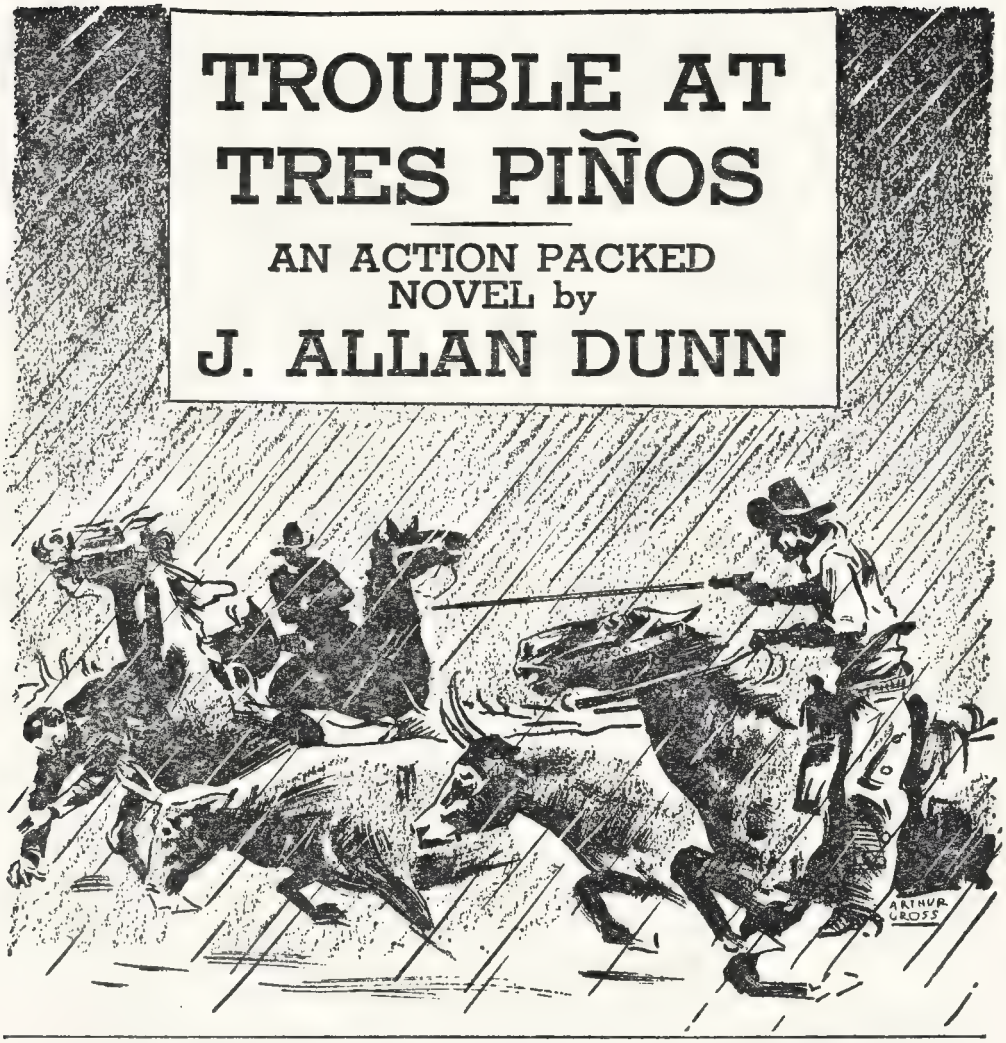


There Was Really Trouble at Tres Pinos and Slim Marvin Rode Right Into It. But Slim Was Not the Sort to Mind Trouble in a Good Cause. And he got it—Night raiders, Cattle Rustlers, Bad Men, and All Their Accompanying Villainies.

CHAPTER I.

SLIM Marvin rode blithely toward Caroca, the county seat, in search of a job. The last one had been spoiled for him by the advent of a new owner who cared little for cattle and less for the West, being intent only upon getting back the money he had advanced on a mortgage.

There had been words between Slim and the mortgagor, who had seemed to entertain the curious idea that because he had not reaped the financial profit he anticipated, his ranch hands should be willing to accept a loss in the wages due them.

The memory of what he had told the new owner helped to keep Slim in a good humor. His phrasing had been brief and crisp and eminently to the point. It had got under the thick hide of the man who had paid him in full and dispensed with his services after Slim had told him that he would rather sift cinders in hell than work for a *hombre* whose nature would contaminate a coyote—or words to that effect.

So, with his best horse and saddle under him, his second string left with a friend at

a neighboring ranch, a nice pay-check in his pocket; Slim had no cares. He was a good cowman—none better—and he had small fears of not landing a job—as soon as his money gave out. Meantime he meant to sleep some, eat sweetened pies and cake, gamble, treat any friends he might make or find at Caroca, and generally relax after long weeks of work.

He had tried out his own county without finding an opening that suited him, and now he was adventuring into comparatively new fields. Only once before had he been to Caroca and he associated that visit with a measure of ill luck that he hoped ardently to redeem on this occasion. He had got into a poker game with certain individuals who made a profession of that pastime and had convinced Slim, for the time being, that he was merely an amateur. He remembered the features of those individuals, and he burned to once more sit with them at a table where the chips clicked and the limit was not mentioned.

Slim's name had grown up with him, bestowed upon him the first day he appeared, a stripling of seventeen, astride a half-broken broomtail mustang, at the fall roundup. That was ten years back, and Slim had developed in many ways. Slim was scarcely the *sobriquet* for him now, but he was lean and his waistline was still ten inches less than his chest.

Good to look at, was Marvin. No girl had ever called him handsome, but he suggested the sun and the wind, virility and friendliness, with eyes that could chill and a jaw that could jut upon occasion into a welded firmness and insistency that caused his fellow riders to speak of Slim as one who did to take along.

SLIM'S singing intentions were better than his execution. His voice was better in speech than song. Slim was constrained to express himself in sentiment—something he steadfastly abjured in everyday affairs. Slim was no poet.

Her name it was Cherokee Mary,
She was sweet as a Cherokee rose;
Though her manners were often contrary
She was light as an elf on her toes.
She could dance like a zephyr-blown thistle
She could smile like the witch that she was;
And when she got mad she could bristle
And cuss like a good one, because
Although she was cute as a fairy
The cutest gal ever I saw,
Yet nobody wedded with Mary
For—she was a Cherokee squaw!

"And I'm no squawman, Pete," he confided to his bay horse. "What's mo', I ain't pinin' to hitch up to any woman, brown, red or white. Me, I think too much of mah libutty, hawss. If I was married now I'd have had to take what that son of a gun offered me back to the ranch, 'stead of tellin' him to his face where he-all headed in. An' you an' me wouldn't be lopin' along this fine mawnin' with one hundred an' eighty bucks in our pockets, hawss, lookin' forward to apple pie that ain't made out of dried apples. Fo' you git one, you sweet-toothed *caballo*, sure's we hit Caroca. Reckon this is Owl Canyon, an' we're half way there."

Owl Canyon thrust itself out of the plain in unusual fashion, two walls of rock honeycombed with caves, the dirst sloping back from their crests to common level again and an irregular passage between the walls Midway, a spring of water gushed, slightly warm, slightly sulphurous, but refreshing at that stage of a ride made dusty with alkali, and sufficient to cause a little oasis of grass and low trees.

Usually there were cattle there, and sometimes tracks showed where deer came down from the distant hills to drink. But it was close to noon and all four-footed things, save those pressed into the service of man, were enjoying what shade and coolness they might find.

Slim, on his seventh stanza, which told of the horrors of an Indian mother-in-law, checked song and horse simultaneously as he rode out of a bay in the cliff, following the scanty strip of shade; and saw the tableau staged on the turf near the spring Two ponies grazed in the background Their riders had apparently dismounted for a drink. One was a man, not as tall as Slim, but much heavier. Slim took a dislike to him at first sight of the swarthy face, almost as dark as a Mexican's, and the sneeringly triumphant features, to say nothing of his action, which aroused in Slim a consuming desire to make a third in the tableau—which he did.

The man had seized by the wrist a girl, slender in riding togs of khaki breeches, brown boots, linen shirt of russet brown with a tie of bright scarlet. There seemed

to have been some sort of a previous scuffle, for her dark hair was disarranged and long strands of it hung to her waist. She was sunbrowned, but color flamed high in her cheeks and Slim caught the flash of spirit in her eyes as he off-saddled and leaped to the rescue.

She was half the man's size and weight, but she defended herself with a desperation that held off his advantage. Once she scored with a rake of her fingernails across his leathern cheek that brought the quick blood and a curse as she all but broke clear, while he strove to get an arm about her.

The oath was but half delivered when Slim cracked the attacker neatly over the elbow with the barrel of his Colt, and slid the gun back into holster while the other, letting go the girl, swerved to face the newcomer. He was rubbing his tingling, temporarily useless arm, and swearing in earnest.

"Shut up," snapped Slim. "Pronto, mister, or I'll put a hole through yo' windpipe!"

The man, conscious of his lame arm, sizing up Slim's calm countenance that was only a mask for flaming eyes that shone like steel, checked his tongue, looking at the cowboy with venomous eyes.

Slim had barely glanced at the girl. He was not interfering as a personal matter—but as one of ordinary range chivalry.

FOR a man to handle a woman brutally was not permissible. That was the code of the West and the other had broken it. Slim intended to administer punishment. But first he swept off his sombrero to the lady, ignoring the scowling and now silent assailant, knowing that the other's gun arm was out of commission for the time being, sure also that there was small doubt about the man's will to speed bullet—or knife—to Slim's vitals.

"Looked like to me that you all might be annoyed some by this coyote," he said in his soft drawl. He was a little abashed at the beauty of the girl; it smote him suddenly, like a light flashed in a dark room. Her eyes were a purplish gray, and long of curling lashes; her nose, short and straight, showed above lips that were most clearly designed—even to Slim—for the tantalizing of all men and the ultimate reward of one. This, though at the moment they were set in a half sneer that did not relax as Slim spoke to her, while her eyes were anything but friendly.

"I suppose you meant well," she said, "but it was not at all necessary for you to interfere. I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

Slim was taken aback. He felt like a fool and fancying he looked like one, conscious of a jaw that sagged in sheer amazement.

Had he stumbled on a quarrel that was going to be eventually ended by a reconciliation the more satisfactory for the temper and violence that led up to it? He had heard of such things—usually between married folks. Did this girl like the roughness of this man? Was she by any chance, his wife? It was incredible that a girl who looked like her could endure such familiarity! There must be some special reason for her utterance.

The ardor that, on her behalf, had fanned the flame of his chivalry, wavered and blew strong again. But he left her out of the affair from that moment.

"I'm right sorry I disturbed you all," he said gravely, and the note of sarcasm was hard to distinguish, though the girl looked at him as if she suspected its presence. Then her glance changed. Warning leaped into it. Slim's back was to the man. She might have spoken, but he whirled at the first hint of caution.

The other's gun was out of its holster before Slim's hand started to swoop down to the butt of his own weapon. The odds were all in favor of the first to draw.

"Stick yore hands up, cowboy. Paw the sky," the stranger said, his sloe eyes glittering evilly, his uncouth face twisted with rage and the desire, the intent, to kill. Slim's first dexterous blow had left him half crazy with one set purpose—to get even. Slim saw that he meant to fire, whether he lifted his hands or not.

"Sled" Raynor had started in as ranch blacksmith and wound up as foreman, partly by natural ability, partly by his bullying tactics backed by personal prowess that made him able to boss the ordinary run of hands.

HE made the boast and held the reputation of being the fastest man with a gun in Caroca County—also the worst, so far as real manhood was concerned. But this last was not generally mentioned. Sled had his following, and it was not scrupulous. But he was proud of his gunplay, proud of his speed and his strength

and, if anyone had told him that a man could stand with his back to him and then beat him out with a gun draw to the level, Sled would have laughed loudly before he proclaimed the other a liar, and laid bets to prove his own superiority.

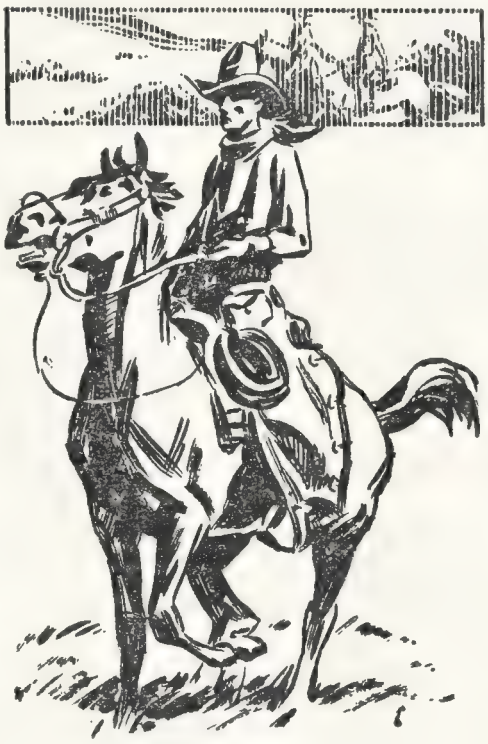
"Stick 'em up, you—!"

The pause came as Sled's eyes widened in astonishment, with something of the terror of a bully who finds himself beaten at his own game.

Slim's gun came out of leather in a blue streak. His elbow stiffened close beside his hip, forearm almost level. He wore his gun low.

There was the merest jerk as the barrel settled into position with its ominous muzzle, like the eye of death, lined on Sled's heart—just a fraction of a second ahead of Sled's own weapon, that was still slightly deflected toward the ground.

Under his swarthy skin, Sled's pigmentary cells reacted like those of a chameleon. He turned gray with the fear of the grave upon him, while he quailed and sobered at the menace and contempt in the eyes of Slim.



SLIM MARVIN

By a tremendous effort he checked the rise of his gun. An inch more and Slim's Colt would belch fire and lead. Sled dropped the ivory-handled weapon in sign of defeat, in token of surrender.

Slim stooped, picked up the gun, broke it, sprayed the cartridges on the turf and handed the weapon to the girl. She took it, in a sort of daze at the swift vision she had had of sudden and violent death, and its diversion by the swift action of the drawling stranger.

She stared wide-eyed as Slim ejected the shells from his own Colt into the palm of his hand, pocketed them, returned the empty gun to holster and deliberately slapped Sled Raynor across the face.

This was a challenge calculated as much to smooth the rebuff he had received from the girl as by a desire to give Sled the lesson he ached to administer.

The color came back to Sled's face, the sting of the blow roused his spirit. The fear of death was taken from him, and the other was delivered into his great hands. He came at the lighter man with the bellow of a bull, fists half open, clutching for a clinch that Slim avoided, sending Sled staggering with a smash to the jaw that rocked his head. Slim, ducking a wild flail, landed his left full on the mouth, splitting a lip, breaking the skin of his own knuckles against the other's teeth.

From the standpoint of a sporting spectator it was a pretty, but one-sided fight. Slim's first two blows had taken away some of Sled's new-found confidence. Sled rushed and roared and flogged in a blind rage, one eye promptly closed and rapidly blackening, his ribs drummed in a tattoo that did his wind no good, all his best blows warded off, by the assailant who danced about him with arms shuttling in and out.

The girl stood apart with small fists clenched at her sides, her face a riddle that was hard to read. She had dropped the gun resentfully on realizing that she had apparently been made a convenience of, and she watched the swift, short combat with eyes that missed nothing, her lips parted, her slender body tense with excitement.

Once or twice she gasped, and caught her lip when, at last, Slim got home with a jolt that shot from hip to point with the

propulsive force of Slim's shoulder muscles behind it. Sled hit the grass, quivered, surged vainly in an attempt to rise, and lay still, his nerve connections shattered.

Slim looked at his man, measuring his length, and then he walked away without a backward glance, ignoring the girl until he had mounted. Then he once more swept off his sombrero, touched spurs to Pete's flanks and loped away, while Sled got staggeringly to his feet and the girl gazed after him with curious speculation in her eyes.

CHAPTER II

SLIM met the same poker players in Caroca, before he had been there many hours, and once again the pride of the amateur card-player was humbled by the technique of the professional. His second night found him with his money vanished, and his experience a little extended.

He lost the last of his dollars on a showdown, swallowed the drink that the winner of the last jackpot had bought, according to card custom, rolled a cigarette and declared himself through.

"Empty as a last year's bird's-nest, gents," he said with a smile. "Now I've got to git me a job. Anyone know of someone aimin' to hire a hand?"

The players did not, but a man stopped him near the door.

"If you're lookin' for a job," he said, "Joe Walsh is in the dance-hall takin' a whirl. He owns the T. P. outfit. I heard him early this evenin' sayin' he needed a rider. Got some colts he wants busted. You look like you could ride some."

"My laigs are long enough, if that's what you mean," said Slim. "I'm much obliged to you for tellin' me. What so't of a lookin' gent is this Walsh?"

The man described him briefly but accurately, and Slim readily picked him out as the dance ended and the partners went to the tables for the inevitable order.

Walsh was a good looking chap with a weak chin and a ready, but somewhat vacuous laugh that was encouraged by the liquor he had drunk. He was fairly sober, but his talk was inclined to babble, and his attentions to the synthetic blonde with whom he clinked glasses had long since passed the merely friendly stage.

Slim knew that in all probability the girl would leave Walsh as soon as the music started for the next dance. There were at least six men for every girl and it was not considered good form for any man to attempt a monopoly of girls, at least during business hours. As the jazzy orchestra struck up, the blonde diplomatically disengaged herself with a smile and a sidelong look at Slim that was clearly an invitation. But Slim, slipping into a seat next to Walsh, disregarded it.

The girl was not without her good looks and Walsh, after an ineffectual clutch at her, gazed at Slim with eyes that were becoming vacuous, but held a hint of resentment at the latter's intrusion.

If Slim had danced with the girl he would have lost all chance of a job with the T. P. outfit. But he had no fancy for it, though he liked dancing well enough on occasion.

"Heard you all were lookin' fo' a rider," he said to Walsh. The rancher seemed to pull his features together, and his loose lips tightened. "I'm lookin' fo' a job," Slim added.

Walsh surveyed him with a glance that took in the other's evident efficiency, visibly stamped upon him from dented Stetson to high-heeled boots.

"I can use another man," he said. "Got some colts that need breaking. After that line-riding. Been losin' stock lately. You ain't afraid to shoot—case it was necessary?"

"Reckon not," drawled Slim. "What are you all paying?"

Walsh countered with a question that showed he had business sense. Slim told of previous employ, and a bargain was made.

"I ain't goin' out to Tres Piños till tomorrow morning," said Walsh. "You need an advance?"

"They got my last pay-check divided up between 'em in there," said Slim with a laugh, nodding toward the adjoining gambling room. "But I got my room an' my hawss paid fo' up till termorer. I ate a good supper an' I reckon I can make out without drawin' none."

There were things about Walsh that Slim rather liked. One of them was the way in which he respected Slim's independence and did not press the loan.

"Have breakfast with me," he said. "We can talk things over. And have a

drink now to cinch the contract."

SLIM accepted. The man who brought the whisky told Walsh that some friends were waiting for him to make up a game.

"Promised 'em I'd play," he said. "See you later. I'll find out if my luck's any better than yours." With a reluctant look to where the blonde was dancing, the owner of the T. P. outfit at Tres Piños lurched over the floor and disappeared.

Slim finished his drink and rolled a cigarette. He had landed a job, which was the main thing and gave him content, but there were certain things about it that provided food for thought. He was not a professional bronco buster, a job usually performed by a specialist trailing from outfit to outfit, but he had no doubt of his own ability to handle unbroken colts. It was the suggestion that stock was being taken from Walsh that interested him. It held a hint of adventure that appealed to him. Slim wondered what sort of foreman he would find at the ranch. Unless that individual was essentially capable he did not think the T. P. outfit likely to be paying many dividends. It does not take the loss of many steers to swallow up profits.

LA ROSE

The dance ended. The blonde refused a drink with her partner, which meant a percentage loss to her and his dissatisfaction. His eyes followed her resentfully as she made for the table where Slim was sitting, but he accepted the situation and vanished in the direction of the bar.

"I wouldn't dance with that bear," she told Slim as she took the seat that Walsh had just left. "Most of 'em dance like they were crushing rock. It's a treat to get a partner that's light on his feet." She flirted with the set of her dress at the shoulder strap, pouted as she saw the effect was lost on Slim, asked him for the makings, and rolled a cigarette deftly as he could have done it himself.

"Aren't you going to buy me a drink?" she asked. Slim flushed a little under his tan.

"I'd like to," he said, "but I'm flat as a sheet of papeh. Just hired out to the T. P. outfit because my roll done evaporated."

"Joe Walsh hired you? He's a good friend of mine. He promised to get up a picnic for me out to the ranch."

Slim eliminated all expression from his face. A ranch where girls of the blonde's type were invited out on pleasure parties by the owner did not coincide with his idea of a properly run outfit.

"You're from the South, ain't you?" she went on. "I'm from Geo'gia myse'f. I was bohn in Savannah." Her accent was suddenly assertive and, to Slim, it sounded somewhat false. "I like Southern boys," she continued. "They know how to treat a lady, no matteh in what circumstances they happen to find her. You'll have a drink with me? And tell me yo' name?"

Slim looked at her, smiled and shook his head.

"I don't mind tellin' you my name," he said. "It's Robert Marvin—Slim they call me mostly. But I reckon I'd ratheh wait till I can pay fo' the treat, thankin' you just the same."

The girl flared up. The spark had started some time since when her woman's instinct had told her that Slim was not falling for her blandishments.

" 'Slim' is right," she said, her voice a trifle shrill, her nostrils dilating as she rose.

"Slim on manners and slim on *dinero*. What's the idea of sitting in here if you can't buy a round? If you want to bum drinks you stand a better chance in the bar, cowboy."

Her hands were on her hips and the keen edge of a brittle temper showed in her eyes as she looked contemptuously at him, and then glanced round. Slim sensed that she was spoiling for a row, hoping to find a champion. His face hardened, and his eyes were like bits of ice when she met them again. Their chill seemed to affect the girl. She shivered and turned the action into a shrug as she walked away, momentarily subdued, until she heard the titter of her mates.

SLIM slowly turned brick red, challenged as a bum and unable to disprove it. He felt that the eyes of all the room were upon him. He developed a cold rage at the girl behind his heat, and knew that he had made an enemy of her. She might try to use her influence with Walsh to lose Slim his job. Not that Slim bothered overmuch about losing a job, but he had cottoned to Walsh somehow, for all the other's condition. He did not think Walsh was the man to fire a good hand on account of the dislike of a dance-hall girl; he did not believe that Walsh, sober, was infatuated with La Rose one-half so much as La Rose was trying to get Walsh into her web by hook or crook.

Still the taunt she flung at him rankled. It made him refuse more than one invitation from men he had met and treated while his money lasted, and he left the Cactus early and abruptly, his new employer busy at a game of stud poker. Slim went to the stable where Pete was corraled, and saw that the bay had been fed and watered properly before he strolled to his hotel. It was too early to turn in. He had nothing better to do than talk to Pete, who was at least a good listener.

"She'd as soon knifed me as not, Pete," he said softly. "It's a safe bet she's no friend of mine from now on."

It was a safe bet. La Rose, stung by the looks and whispers of the other girls, had her chagrin made superlative by the fact that the broad-shouldered cowboy had somehow broken through a hard and bitter shell she had not experienced since her girlhood. Here was the type of man she would have intuitively desired for a mate.

"He ain't the kind to take up with any sort," she told herself. "Thinks I'm dirt under his feet. Damn him, I'll get even with him, if it kills me!"

La Rose had no especial fondness for Walsh. With Walsh's foreman she had had an affair which threatened to terminate before she desired it. The man had grown cold. She had seen her power over him slipping and sought to bring him back by using Walsh. That was her motive for making the owner of the T. P. outfit promise her a picnic. And now Slim had hired out there. So she had a triple reason for going—to show the foreman that she could bring down bigger game than he was, at the same time to flaunt her triumph in front of Slim. It began to look as if her attractions were on the wane. It was up to her to make hay while her sun still shone. To marry Walsh one way or another, to discharge the foreman and also Slim, that would wind up matters beautifully.

Of the three men she liked the foreman best. He was a blackguard who bullied her, but La Rose craved a master, even if he were cruel.

She gripped fiercely the arm of her clumsy, but complimentary partner, so that the man looked at her in surprise.

"What's eatin' you?" he asked. "Yore eyes look like a pizen snake's."

SHE forced them to become languishing, but she had not fooled the man.

"I wonder who she's gunnin' for?" he asked himself later. "These gals are all hell for excitement. Me, I'm not mixin' in."

La Rose watched the door. The foreman of the T. P. had promised her he would be there. She knew of no reason why he should stay away just because Walsh had come to town. She had meant him to see her dancing with Walsh, but now she would try and work up a quarrel between him and the stranger who had rebuffed her. The foreman would not know that the other had been hired. After he had quarreled with him he would keep him out of his job—if he still wanted one worse than he did the doctor, or the undertaker. There were notches on the handle of the foreman's gun.

But he did not appear. She did not want to ask Walsh about him and Walsh was taken up by his game. Even La Rose

dared not invade the gambling room. But she looked in and saw that Slim was not there, that he had left the Cactus—and charged that against his score. Three men had failed her in one evening.

SLIM had stretched himself out beside Pete. There was sufficient bedding in the stall to temper the hard clay beneath. Pete was company. It was better there than in the stuffy little hotel room.

He lay there, with a bent arm for a pillow and thought of the girl of Owl Canyon. Not deliberately. It started with a renewed satisfaction at the beating he had given the bully and then her face monopolized his musing. She had warned him, even though she had snubbed him. He could not get rid of her.

He tried, without success, to dismiss her with thoughts of his new job and speculations as to what it would be like. But he had little to base these last upon—save the reference to his shooting ability. He had heard, vaguely, of organized cattle rustling in Caroca County, which might make things exciting. But these matters would not crystalize, he could not herd his fancies. The girl's face again obtruded, fading only before drowsiness.

He was practically asleep when voices aroused him. His senses became instantly alert, but he did not move. Two men—riders by their hats and their walk, proclaimed vaguely silhouetted against the out-of-doors as they entered the open shed—glanced in where Pete turned his wise head to look at them and swung it back, indifferently, to his feed. Slim, on the floor, was indistinguishable, not to be looked for. There was the click of a matchhead against a nail, the odor of tobacco smoke.

Then came their voices, low-pitched, in the next stall.

"Seen anything of the Chief?" asked one. "Time he showed up. I want to draw some money. There's a game on that looks good to me."

"You won't git none out of the Chief ternight."

"Why won't I? He stayed behind to collect for fifteen fat three-year-olds, didn't he? I helped deliver 'em, didn't I? I got something comin' to me, ain't I?" The speaker was truculent, partly drunk. The other expostulated with him.

"We got to git back to the ranch. Hawsses are tired, an' we got to ride some to git back by breakfast."

"Aw, to hell with the ranch an' breakfast, too! Why don't the Chief pull somethin' worth while? There's money comin' to me, and I want it."

"And spile the whole layout. Wouldn't be healthy for you if you did that. Folks see you blowin' money round like you was a millionaire, 'stead of a ranch hand, an' they'll begin talkin'."

"Let 'em talk. I'll tell the Chief straight out the way I feel about it—"

"Tell me what?"

A third man had come into the shed and stood at the end of the stall where Slim lay, wondering what rancher was going to miss fifteen steers in the morning. The newcomer's voice was harsh and threatening.

"If you boys can't keep yore tongues from clackin' we'll have to have 'em tended to," he threatened roughly.

"There ain't no one round here," defended the grumbler, a bit lamely.

"That's got nothin' to do with it. You know the rules. 'F you've got any kick comin'—an' you ain't—you put it up to the Council. There's big things movin', and we don't aim to have them sp'iled by any loose-jawed punchers. You boys git yore hawsses, an' we'll light for home. I've been busy figgerin' how to put *dinero* in yore pockets while you been lappin' up booze. Come on."

Slim could dimly see the horse the last comer had ridden, standing ground-anchored in the corral. The two others, silenced, brought their mounts out of stalls at the far end of the shed. The "Chief" remained at the head of Slim's improvised bedchamber, and Slim took no chances on shifting in the rustling straw.

That the fifteen steers had been stolen he held no doubt; also none that any suggestion of an eavesdropper would call for shooting first and investigation afterward. Though the voice of the Chief seemed vaguely familiar he could not place it. He had heard many new voices the past couple of days and nights. The matter was none of his immediate business. Rustlers he had no use for, as a matter of his profession, but he had his moments of discretion and all the cowboy's inherent dislike of horning in—for all his swift championing of the girl in Owl Canyon. That was quite a different affair from this. He had no proof

against these men save casual talk, or talk that could easily appear casual.

The two others came up, leading their already saddled mounts. All three mounted with the despatch of long custom and were off. Slim slid out of his stall for a closer look.

If Pete had been saddled he might have followed them. Not figuring on needing the bay before morning, he had taken his saddle into the office of the stable. As it was, they were outbound for the ranch, and, as he told himself, it was not he who had lost the fifteen steers. The night was chilly. He had not noticed it so much in the stall with Pete as an impromptu stove, but he did now and decided that the hotel bed, with its blankets, was the better place for the sleep he still sorely needed.

CHAPTER III

FOR a while, as Slim and Walsh rode out toward Tres Piños together, the latter was uncommunicative. He had not been able to eat breakfast, and he confided to his new rider that he had a splitting headache.

"I wish you'd taken an advance from me last night," he said. "I'd be that much ahead of those sharps that trimmed me last night."

The fresh air of early morning and the action of the ride gradually alleviated Walsh's day-after symptoms. His eyes were still muddy, but he grew more cheerful and communicative. The two took a mutual liking to each other. Now and then a fleeting look of hardness passed over the features of the owner of Tres Piños as if he had unpleasant thoughts, but Slim decided that the man was his own worst enemy, with plenty of good qualities that might have been better developed under different circumstances.

"Hope you'll like it at Tres Piños," said Walsh. "We'll do what we can to make you. They say we set the best table in the county. Got a Chink cook, but my sister runs the commissary and she's a wonder." His face clouded.

"I've made a full-sized ass of myself," he went on ruefully. "You know the blonde I was with—reckon you danced with her. She sure can lift a light and lively hoof.

"She wants to get out of the game she's in. Asked me would I help her, and of course I said yes. Fair enough, but I promised I'll get up some sort of a picnic for her out to the ranch. That was easy enough last night but, well, there's nothing of the snob about my sister Belle, but she draws her lines, an' I reckon a gal that dances at the Cactus is outside of 'em.

"If Belle took a notion on her own account to help her out it 'ud be different. But she ain't strong on me goin' to the Cactus at all. You—you wouldn't want to invite La Rose out some Sunday on yore own account? You could say she wanted to buy a hawss. Mebbe we could fix things up that way."

"I don't reckon she'd come fo' my askin'," said Slim. "I didn't git on right well with her last night. An' I'd sure hate to git in wrong with yore sister right off the jump." Walsh groaned.

"Reckon I got to draw out my own hoof. Funny you didn't get along with La Rose. I don't go to the Cactus more'n once a month on an average, an' she always seemed a prime favorite with all the boys."

Slim turned the talk. "You said somethin' about losin' stock when you hired me," he said. "You all been havin' trouble with rustlers?"

Walsh turned in his saddle with his face suddenly grown hard and stern.

"Reckon I was drinking more'n I figgered. Makes a man talk foolish an' loose. You better forget that, Marvin."

"I sure will," said Slim, and kept his wonder to himself that a man who had been missing fat steers should want to keep quiet about it.

"We'll be home inside of an hour," Walsh spoke up presently as, at midmorning, stopping at a willowed spring to breathe and water the ponies, they halted amid the first slopes of the foothills toward which they had been steadily riding. "I've got a good ranch," Walsh went on, "belongs to Belle and myself, half an' half. Old Man left it that way. Plenty of water, good shade, lots of native grass an' open range back of it atop the mesa. Full section under wire. T. P. beef fetches top price. The Old Man always kept the stock up with thoroughbred bulls and I've done the same.

Slim, finishing his smoke, pictured Belle Walsh, idly enough. She would be older than her brother, he imagined, taffy-colored of hair with a stout and shapeless figure, a prime cook and housekeeper, but inclined

to be fussy as to the condition of mess-hall and bunkhouse. She would be generally intent upon keeping the riders in their places, which meant away from the ranch-house. There only the favored foreman, by right of established, unwritten law, might claim the privilege of evening entertainment and, sometimes, take his meals. But so long as the grub was good that did not bother Slim, and he did not mean to bother the lady.

THEY entered a draw that gradually narrowed to a gulch. Back of the mesa that ever loomed up before them, a dark cloud was slowly rising and advancing. Against it the face of the mesa was startlingly displayed, with three great pines plain in the immediate foreground as if they stood on the very verge of the mesa cliff. They were old and their shafts towered high before a bough branched off. One was bare of foliage, lightning blasted, the two others tufted with dark but vivid green.

Walsh pointed them out as they crossed the sparkling, shallow creek that suddenly looped its way across the draw.

"Tres Piños," he said, pride once again in his tones. "They named the place for it before my dad's time. Folks claim they're three hundred years old. That's what the Indians say. Great landmarks. Look prime against that cloud, don't they? That looks like a cloudburst, but we ought to beat it home. You'll hear this crick singin' when it breaks.

"By thunder! That's Belle now. Seen us comin'."

Slim saw a rider on a pinto horse, and the rider seemed slim as a boy.

Slim chuckled to himself at his preconceived notion of Walsh's sister. No stout, taffy-haired woman of middle age would have ridden the mustang like a whirlwind. The pony's glossy hide gleamed silver and copper. There was a fleck of brilliant orange color at the girl's neck, flaring long before there was any chance of distinguishing features. Yet there came over Slim a curious feeling, the premonition he defined as a hunch, developing into certainty as the oncoming rider, catapulting down that narrow trail, tossed up an arm in greeting while Walsh shouted a welcome. Genuine affection between these two, Slim told himself, and suddenly felt an outsider, unattached and lonely.

BELLE WALSH

Here was the girl he had rescued from the bully. He had considered that she had been both rude and ungrateful. Despite the visions of the night, he had ordered himself to forget her, and now his heart pumped furiously, so that he could feel the hot blood tingling to his finger-tips. No girl had ever made him feel that way before. He resented it.

"Slim Marvin is goin' to ride for us," said Walsh, by way of introduction. "He's the kind we want. Goin' to start in bustin' colts. Up to you to keep him contented, Sis."

The girl's eyebrows went up slightly, as if she were surprised at her brother's enthusiastic endorsement of an untried employe. She gave Slim a cool little nod.

"A *good* hand's always welcome at Tres Piños," she said with irritating emphasis. "I think I saw Mr. Garvin Tuesday in Owl Canyon. He must have been on his way to Caroca."

"The name's Marvin, miss," said Slim. "Not Garvin." There was anger back of

his quick flush, but he followed her lead. She showed plainly she did not want their meeting referred to. "But I don't remember meetin' you all," he drawled. "Seems like I should have."

That got him a gleam from her eyes—direct. He could not decide if it meant surprise, anger, a certain admiration or more positive amusement.

He dropped back, letting brother and sister ride together. He could see that they soon got into talk that hinged on serious matters, the girl relating indignantly something that had happened, the man angry, receiving it wrathfully, then slumping suddenly with a shrug of his shoulders while the girl flared up and rode ahead in a flash of anger. She pricked her pinto to a lope that took them to the narrow trail that wound up the right hand cliff to the bench above.

She could hardly have told her brother of the Owl Canyon episode after practically denying it before Slim. Still, she might have eliminated Slim from her version. It was a single trail now and, when the men reached the bench, the girl had vanished into a grove of cottonwoods that screened off the main portion of the T. P. buildings. Slim came up beside Walsh who rode on in gloomy self communion, and they loped in silence by fields of emerald alfalfa, growing vigorously under irrigation. The whole ranch bore signs of careful planning, though there were hints here and there of carelessness—tools left out, a broken lateral gate, a windmill that squeaked.

THOUGH Walsh's face was somber, his brows were creased and his mouth and jaw firmer than Slim had so far seen them. He ventured a remark.

"Likely stand. Second crop, I reckon?"

"Yep." Walsh shook off his depression. Alfalfa does fine. Belle's goin' in with the car to Caroca after dinner. Nothin' you left behind?"

"My hawss is packin' all I own, 'cept my second string pony. Left him in the next county. I'll send fo' him sometime, or my friend'll ship him oveh."

The big cloud was perilously close to the sun, ominous. The three pines were still in vivid light, the middle one showing almost white. It looked not unlike a great gallows, Slim thought, the fancy heightened by the presence of a buzzard on the outstanding horizontal limb.

They trotted down a narrow lane between two corrals while the sky began to darken more and more, and things became strangely silent. The advancing cloud was dense enough to blot out any sun.

"Belle'll lay off that trip, I reckon," said Walsh, as they emerged in full sight of the long, low ranch-house.

A man came out from a small shack that had a sign on it—OFFICE—advancing toward them to suddenly stop and stare at Slim, who gazed back with his face as hard as granite, his body, easy in the saddle, suddenly alert, hand falling back instinctively toward his gun butt.

For a moment the man's bruised face was devilish, then it twisted into shape, the eyes still smouldering malevolently though the mouth, with its cut lip, formed into what was meant for a grin as Walsh called out, "Hello, Sled! Here's Slim Marvin. Used to be with T-in-a-box, over in the next county. Goin' to break these colts for a start. He's on the payroll. Slim, this is Sled Raynor, foreman."

Slim's watchful eyes were glinting like mica flakes in granite, but Raynor only nodded at him with rough acknowledgement that was outwardly friendly.

"We sure need a good buster," he said. "Glad to meet you, Marvin. Kind of worried I'd have to break those colts myself. You'll find a couple spare bunks in the bunkhouse. Take either of 'em. Make yorese'f at home. Chow's in the leanto back of the house.

Slim was plainly dismissed—with another puzzle. It began to look as if Belle Walsh and Sled Raynor had mutually agreed to say nothing of what happened. Why? She did not seem the sort to permit insult.

"What about this fifteen head, Sled?" he heard Walsh demanding as he rode toward the bunkhouse. "Belle tells me they were run off last night. It's plumb funny I lose cattle whenever I go to town. Plumb funny they always happen to be three-year-olds." Slim caught the reply, assured, almost insolent.

"Ain't it? Thet's jest how it did happen."

"No one ridin' herd? Look here, Sled —" Walsh's voice, thickly passionate, stopped. His sister was coming down the path. She had changed into a gingham

gown and a hat that fitted snugly, pulling on gloves as she came.

"I'm going to eat in town, Joe," she said, her voice cool. "You and Sled can talk things over by yourselves."

Raynor had pulled off his hat, but the girl paid no attention to him. She must have caught the note of quick rage in her brother's halted speech. She passed so close to Raynor that she almost brushed him, but he might well have been the gate post, and his swarthy face turned almost purple.

There was thunder in the air, storm about to break loose, but Slim fancied that all the tenseness did not come entirely from th atmospheric conditions.

"You can't go in now, sis. Thet cloud's goin' to break inside of a few minutes. You'll never make the crick till it goes down."

"I'll go round by the big bridge," she said coldly. "I've got my slicker in the car. And I'm eating in town. Raynor's been eating in the bunkhouse," she added, pointedly, as she left the two gazing after her. It seemed to Slim that she was skirting deliberately on the edge of some dangerous topic, as if she dared Raynor to tell why he had eaten in the bunkhouse while Walsh was absent. Yet she had clearly avoided it before.

And the fifteen rustled steers! The three men in the corral shed! The one they had called Chief. There had been a moment last night when he had wondered if Sled Raynor's had been the voice he had thought he recognized. But it was not. The girl turned—called back.

"There's a message on your desk, Joe. I found it skewered to the front door this morning. I kept the knife that fastened it."

There was challenge in that. It was likely she did not expect Slim to hear it, though he was not sure about that. But his ears were good. Walsh swung from his saddle, calling out for someone to come and take his horse as he strode up the path to the veranda, Raynor following. A cowboy with a face the color and texture of a walnut, bow-legged from the saddle, came hurrying to the horse. The girl had disappeared.

Slim unsaddled Pete hurriedly, turned him into a corral, toting his saddle and warbag for the refuge of the bunkhouse. The storm was on them.

He heard a flivver engine starting furiously as it was given gas. Then the sound was lost as a javelin of lightning rived the great curtain that was sweeping out to the plain and thunder pealed and crashed and pealed again, heralding the tremendous downpour of the rain, hissing as it struck the ground. The trees swayed. Rivulets started here and there, confluent, hurrying to the creek that would become a raging torrent in the next few minutes.

In the midst of it, racing with the storm, was the girl who had found the knife-skewered message on the door.

The interior of the bunkhouse was as dark as if it had been night. And it was empty. A flare of lightning showed it—stove and table, bunks and benches, a few chairs, odds and ends of personal belongings about. Slim dropped his heavy saddle to the floor.

There was trouble at Tres Piños—that was very evident—and Slim Marvin had a surefire hunch that he was destined to take a hand in that trouble.

CHAPTER IV

THE girl and her brother sat together in the big living-room before a fire where pine burned briskly, for the nights on the mesa bench were cold. The ranch boasted an electric plant for pumping and lights and the electricity was veiled by tasteful shades of parchment.

There was no one else present. Raynor's privilege had seemingly been withdrawn, or he had not chosen to exercise it. The faces of brother and sister were grave. The girl held a paper in her hand, a square of wrapping paper on which was roughly scrawled:

"Receat for 15 Steers Contributed The Nite Hawks"

The paper showed a slit near its top. She fingered a cheap hunting knife, the blade worn and the vulcanite handle scarred.

"How much longer are we going to stand for this sort of thing, Joe?" she asked. "The whole county scared by a mob that steals cattle and calls itself the Night Hawks. They say in town no one knows who belongs to it, or who doesn't, and they are all afraid to talk about it.

"Raynor had no night herd out. Claims

he thought they were safe in the lower end of the gulch, not half a mile from the line fence. And this the third bunch we've lost this year. Three thousand dollars won't cover the loss. What are you going to do about it? Fire Raynor—or are you afraid of him?"

Her brother covered his face with his hand as if to protect it from the fire.

"I can't fire him, Belle," he said wearily. "I've got my reasons. But I'm not afraid of him, if that is what you mean. I'd like the chance to kill him," he added with a spurt of energy. The girl looked at him sadly, then her face brightened with resolve.

"Your new hand thrashed him on Tuesday," she said quietly. "He told you his horse jumped at a rattler in the road and fell over the cliff. That's what he told the rest of the boys. And Marvin hasn't said anything to the contrary, so far."

"What? Slim beat him up? You saw it. How did it happen?"

"Raynor was trying to make love to me. Marvin thought I didn't want him to. He saw me fighting with Raynor, and he interfered."

"Sled, making love to you! The yellow coyote!" Walsh was not wearing a gun, but his hand made an instinctive gesture as he sprang up, his face flaming. He started to stride toward the door while his sister watched him curiously. He stopped, turned, flinging up his arms in an impotent motion.

"Sit down, Joe," she said. "Tell me about it. I've got a right to know. Raynor's got something on you. He almost said as much when he swore I'd marry him before he was through—and be glad to." Her voice carried a contempt she seemed unable to curb entirely. "What is it, Joe?"

WALSH hesitated, standing by the fire, forearm on the mantel, head on it, kicking at a log.

"I heard some things in town today, Joe. That's why I wanted to go, why I wouldn't wait. I'll tell you about them presently. But tell me about Raynor first. Before he does."

He turned a haggard, careworn face to her.

"I'll tell you, Belle. I've hoped there was some way out. There isn't any. But he'll not marry you. He'll not lay his dirty fingers on you again. The mangy breed!"

"Breed?"

His grandmother was Mexican—or Indian. He's got me in a cleft stick, Belle. He's been bleeding me, but I didn't dream he'd touch you—except as you lost with the steers."

"You think he's mixed up in their being rustled? I've suspected that. That ties him up with the Night Hawks."

"Mebbe. There's people use that name for a mask. He's hinted at it—at the power back of him. Hinted I should join—that I'd have to. It's been raisin' hell with me, Belle. I——"

"Go on, Joe. We'll work it out."

"We can't unless—but that would leave you in the mess. I've gone over and over it." His fists clenched, opened. He looked like a young man suddenly stricken, grown old.

"We can, Joe, and we will. Even if—we have to go away from here."

She spoke with an effort. Her brother's face lighted, dulled again.

"I'll go with you anywhere, Joe," she said. He flashed her a look of gratitude, of love, but his features were pinched.

"You can't go far on the road I may have to travel, Sis. It may lead to the penitentiary. It may— They hang for murder in this state," he ended abruptly.

"Murder!" Her face blanched. "You! I don't believe it." And her chin grew firm as her eyes flashed.

"It was this way, Belle. I don't know so much about it, after all," he went on hurriedly, like a man resolved to a confession and anxious to get through with it. "I had been drinking, of course. I was drunk. It was after the spring roundup—not that that's any excuse. We kept it up late, and Raynor said there was a *fandango* on at a place just outside the town. Said he could take me if I wanted to risk it, but he'd not take any more, because the Mexicans were not over fond of us mingling with their rackets, and I could talk Spanish. Of course he speaks it like a native.

"They did resent it, though the dance went on. There was one chap who pretended to take offense because I threw a gold piece at the girl who danced. It's the custom, of course, but the gold drew attention. He said a lot of things in Spanish. Raynor told me to swallow them, but

the state I was in—we'd been drinking that rotten Pisco, it's like fire in you, gets into your brain—I said something back.

"Sometimes I think it was all planned. I'm almost sure there was dope in my last drink. I can't remember the rest of it. I know the Mexican drew a knife, I can almost swear to that, though Raynor says he didn't. I can remember a shot—" Walsh spoke with frowning brows, striving to conjure something definite out of a hazy memory. "After that—I don't know.

"I was outside, struggling with Raynor who was trying to get me into the saddle. He said I had shot the man and killed him, that my bullet went through his head between the eyes—God!

"The door of the *cantina* opened and a mob came out, howling. We were in the saddle, riding like devils with a pack after us. We got clear, up to the old adobe on the Spanish grant. And we'd lost them. The ride had sobered me—with the thought of what I'd done. Still I couldn't remember drawing my gun or pulling trigger—till I looked at it. Raynor had it. Took it away from me after the shooting. One shell had been fired—only one, but that was enough. It had killed a man."

Presently he spoke again in a flat, hopeless voice.

"Raynor seemed decent about it. He said he could fix it, that the man was wanted anyway for smuggling, if not worse. And he did hush it up. I couldn't tell you. I had to get the money. You kept our books. So—that first bunch of steers we lost—I stole my own cattle, Belle, our cattle, God help me.

"Since then Raynor has used his hold over me. He may belong to the Night Hawk gang, or he may have used that for a cover, but he's taken our steers, connived at it, and he laughs in his sleeve at me. He's threatened covertly. He's even suggested partnership and now—he's dared to think of you. I'll——"

She clung to him, soothing him, telling him she didn't believe that he had committed a crime, that it would all come to light.

"He's got it all written down, witnessed, left with someone who'll use it if anything happens to him. My hands are tied. If I killed him, it would all come out just the same. You'd be disgraced. Belle, I've drunk to forget it, I've shown the yellow streak. I'll never touch another drop, another card. I swear it. But what's the good of that?"

"Leave it to me, Joe. We'll find a way. We'll get at the truth. You didn't kill anyone. If you were drunk, drugged, someone else could have used your gun, or they could have used their own, and then fired a shell from yours to make you think you did it."

He looked at her with the face of a drowning man who has grasped a plank out of the smother. And then he found it only a straw, sinking into despondency.

But the girl was fired with resolution. She communicated some of it to him. "We'll wait, Joe. I can handle Raynor."

"You'll not encourage that snake. I won't stand for it."

"Leave that to me, Joe. We're fighting for your life, for our happiness. Trust a woman's weapons."

FOR a time he sat silent. Then he got up.

"You're the better man of the two, Belle. I'm glad I've told you. I'll do what you say."

She kissed him, clung to him for a little.

"What did you hear in town?" he asked.

"It was Wing that started it. Joe, I don't think it's just curiosity on his part, but there is little goes on that that Chinaman doesn't know about. And Wing has been devoted to me ever since I nursed him through pneumonia last winter.

"People call Chinese eyes inscrutable, but I've seen a lot in his. He came to me yesterday after you had left. It cost him something. He was terribly afraid all the time we were talking—not long. You know how he talks in his pidgin English. 'Missy, something not all right along of you, along Mister Joe. I sabe. You take laundry in town tomorrow. You take along Hop Lee—he my cousin. He belong along same society. You tell him Wing send you. Maybe he tell you something.'

"Of course the laundry was just an excuse, but it was a good one. I saw Hop Lee. He had been expecting me. And he was frightened, too. Afraid of the Night Hawks, I suppose.

" 'You sabe Raynor foreman your place?' he said. 'You sabe him no good? Plenty bad. No good along your place. No good along your brother. I heap sabe. No can speak too much. You very good along Wing. That all same good along me. Sabe?

Bimeby, maybe you get in heap trouble, I talk along some more. Not now.'

"And that was all I could get out of him. He talked laundry and nothing else. Everything was 'no sabe' and his face was just a mask. But his eyes were kind, Joe."

"I don't see where that helps us much."

"Neither do I. Not now. But they were both afraid, and they went out of their way to say something to cheer me up. They don't take risks for nothing. They don't talk for nothing.

"That wasn't all I heard. I had a long, confidential talk with Mrs. Jaynes. You know that Mr. Jaynes and she lived in Mexico City, and that he has always been close to President Diaz. Well, there's trouble in the air. Nearly always is. Profirio Diaz rules with a heavy hand, and it is easy for any glib talker and fighter to stir up the peons into a revolution.

"There's one on foot now, and Diaz is letting it grow so that he can get all those who are against him in the ranks of the discontents and then crush them with one blow. His spies know all that is going on. Mrs. Jaynes likes both of us, and I think she guesses that things are not over good with us in a financial way. A Mexican federal agent has seen Mr. Jaynes in regard to negotiations about ammunition and the possible purchase of a gunboat from our government. And—this is where we come in—the federal troops are on the way to the border. They'll make headquarters almost across the river from Caroca, preliminary to swooping down on the rebels. They'll need beef. Jaynes will recommend you. They'll pay top prices for old cows. And they'll pay cash.

"Joe, if we could do that, get Raynor out of the way somewhere. Sell off the stock?"

"Go away? Run away and leave Tres Piños?"

SHE nodded, her lips firm pressed yet a little tremulous.

"No. I'm not going to run away. You've stiffened me, Sis. I don't think I killed that man. We'll stick. I've told you, and that helps, a heap. But we'll sell that beef, too. We'll have money to fight with. Raynor stealing those steers, with what he might do, has had me nearly crazy. Like taking it from you. You know how slim the bank account is. And a note coming due. I've been gambling like a fool, to try and make it up.

"We've got to do more than get Raynor out of the way. I can do that by sending him with a shipment on the reservation contract. I meant to go myself, afraid to trust him with the steers or the money. But most of the hands are his choosing. He's made it rotten for the good ones who wouldn't stand for his methods. Weeded 'em out, and I had to accept his reasons. You wondered why I let 'em go."

"That was your end of it, Joe."

"There are a few I can trust. It might be managed. That new chap, Marvin. You don't seem to like him, Belle. Seemed to me you were pretty cool the way he'd acted. Funny Sled stood for him the way he did."

"Sled Raynor won't want him to say anything about what happened at Owl Canyon. It would make his men jeer at him or lose confidence in him, anyway. He'll ask Marvin to say nothing. And I didn't know that I was going to tell you, Joe, but I had to, to make you tell me—everything. So I—discouraged him."

"I'll say you did. Think he'll keep quiet?"

She nodded, her face away from her brother.

"Mighty fine chap. He'll do to take along. It ain't fair to snub him, because he did you a favor."

There was a curious little smile on the girl's lips before she replied. "There was a minute when I wanted him to kill Raynor, Joe. But he beat him to the draw and he took his gun away and handed it to me. Then he fought him bare-handed. I was afraid his interference would work wrong with Raynor. He'd been hinting things to me, too. They nerved me to talk to you tonight. But he only sulked. I suppose he was thinking up excuses for the boys. It was a wonderful fight, Joe. Marvin can take care of himself."

"By Jings, I believe you do like him after all, Belle!"

The firelight flushed her face; perhaps something else.

"You ought to make it up to him some way, Belle. Him and me are goin' to be pals. You oughtn't to have snubbed him."

"You need a pal, Joe. A man pal. Besides me. And—if I snubbed him it was only for his own good."

"I'll be Jinged!" said her brother. "You women are beyond me."

"I'm going to find the right one to travel along with you, some day, Joe."

"Not much. Not while I've got you. Don't you go thinkin' of gittin' married."

"Me?" She laughed and left him, taking up the Night Hawks' receipt, throwing it into the fire. He did not notice that she had not replied to his remark.

"That wasn't quite all I heard today, Joe. They are talking of getting up a crowd of the owners, those who have had cattle stolen, to clean out the Night Hawks. The Cattlemen's Association will finance it, pay a big reward."

"They won't ask me, if they guess how my steers went," he said grimly. "I can't join 'em the way things stand."

"You can't refuse them, Joe. But that'll work out. It's late. I'm going to bed! Good night, Joe."

After she had gone Walsh sat late by the fire. His thoughts were bitter ones, but they strengthened his face. It was moulded into resolve when at last he followed her example.

CHAPTER V

COLT was purely a technical name for an unbroken horse, as applied to the roan that stood stiff-legged and flat-eared in protest against the rope that held and choked it while Slim reached carefully for the loose end of his single-fire cinch beneath the brute's belly.

The roan was all of four years old, a wise, rangy looking beast, of hammer head that was half concealed by the blindfold. It was sick with rage since the moment it had been driven with the rest of the cavvy into the corral, then segregated with others that had managed so far to hold the freedom of the range. It was afraid—afraid of the man smell and the man noise, the whirling rope and tightening noose, and it had fought valiantly, for all its fear. It was far from spent yet, though it had only quivered when Slim gingerly set the saddle on its back. One helper held the rope high heels dug into the soft dirt of the corral, two others had helped adjust the bridle and the heavy bit. The roan's head was high, too high to be handled. He had suddenly tossed it up from the clutch of the helpers and they waited their chance to get another hold.

The horse had shown all signs of being a twister, and they left the rope on him until the last moment, after the saddle was cinched. Slim had not expected to break horses, and his single cinch was not what he would have chosen for the job, but it would do, rather than borrow another saddle. The roan had quivered when first blanket and then leather had been placed upon his back. After that and the upswing of his head on a neck of steel, he stood taut, lips drawn back, nostrils wide to show their crimson lining. He was game, and he meant to put up the fight of his life against the servitude of the saddle. Slim had picked the horse as the hardest job of the bunch in hand, meaning to tackle it while he was fresh.

The helpers were plainly anxious of their own minor risks in the performance. They had been turned over to him by Raynor, still surface friendly, but not trusted by Slim. Belle Walsh had been right. Raynor had taken him aside the night before, after supper, while she and her brother talked together in the ranch-house, and suggested that byegones should be byegones.

"I reckon I'd have acted the same way if I was in yore place," the foreman said. "Course you don't know all the circumstances. You're sure quick on the draw, an' handy with yore fists but—I'll put it to you square an' fair: We need a good hand here an', if you stay, you can easy see it wouldn't do me no good with the boys, bein' foreman, to have a yarn like that passed round. You got all the best of it. How erbout callin' it quits?"

"Suits me," said Slim. And it did, since he had determined to remain and watch the trouble that was brewing at Tres Piños. Raynor's plea was specious. He had undoubtedly accounted for his bruises another way. The best way to get out of it was to make a pact with the new rider, or Slim might destroy much of the bully's prestige.

"Walsh does some of the hirin'," Raynor continued, "but I do the firin'. If you like the job it's all hunky with me fo' you to stay."

"Lies like the clock ticks," Slim told himself. "He's jest about as fair minded as a sheddin' rattler."

THE men, ropers and riders and the rest, were, he shrewdly suspected, most of them on the ranch because of their sympathies with Raynor. It is not always as easy to tell strains of mixed blood as one might imagine, even by a range rider, where all faces are burned dark by sun and wind and rain. But where Indian blood is strong the eyes are telltales, and it was such a sign that made Slim suspicious that half a dozen at least of the hands had an admixture of blood that came from the south side of the Rio Grande. Raynor amongst them.

But he said nothing, even when he began to believe that Raynor had not tried to give him the best men for helpers in the breaking corral. Walsh did not appear, but it seemed as if general operations had been suspended to watch the new hand tackle his dangerous job. No buster lasts long. Broken limbs are the least of his troubles. A broken neck may finish him, but rupture is sure to claim him. He may have to sit a horse until the blood comes out of nose and ears and mouth; there is always the chance of a leg smashed against the corral fence by a maddened horse, ribs crushed by a rearing fall, a chest perforated by the steel core of the saddle tree and horn. On the range, busting holds the fascination of a bullfight, and usually the work is done by a traveling professional for high wages.

It looked as if every man on the T. P. except the boss was perched on the top rail, aside from the helpers. Raynor sat astride a chute gate. The Chinese cook peered through the bars. The tall and taciturn Englishman who seemed to attend to all the machinery on the ranch, squatted, with his grasshopper legs and brick-red face atop a hinge pole of the main gate, humped up, smoking a briar pipe.

Interest was usual enough and this attendance might be flattery. It might be lax discipline on the part of Raynor. It might be a special custom—or it might be something else. That Raynor hoped for a spill Slim was certain. There had been few friendly overtures made to the new hand in the bunkhouse overnight. The silent Britisher's attitude had been, after all, the most cordial.

Slim felt the general wish, the almost universal hope that the roan might worst him, but these hostile statics only made his lean face a litle grim, and his eyes hard and frosty. He was quite sure of his ability to ride the horse—given fair play.

He caught the swinging cinch with its steel ring, threaded through the latigo strap and drew it taut, while the roan grunted and instinctively blew out against the pressure.

"Git hold of his head," Slim snapped, his drawl gone in action. "Git that rope off him. Stan' ready to take off that blindfold—an' don't take it off till I give the word."

The helpers got grip on the bridle at cheek straps while Slim set his knee against the roan, watching for the first jump, hauling on the latigo, gaining inch by inch, making his turns. Still the roan stood with only the restless nostrils, the slightly twitching ears and flanks that shivered once in a while, to show that it had any idea of what was going on.

Slim gathered reins and mane into his left hand, close to the withers, facing the saddle. He swung a stirrup toward his foot, but set only enough heft upon it to hold place while his right hand stole up to the horn.

The roan would break out into an equine tornado the moment that blindfold and cheek grips were released, he knew. He had to get into the saddle at lightning speed or counteract a whirl by drawing himself flat to the withers until the jump was ended, and then fling leg over cantle. He put a little weight on the stirrup, the saddle creaked slightly as the roan leaned away and his weight came on the horn. Slowly the roan's back was arching, like a cat's. The rope was off.

"Now!"

THE helpers sprang back, raced for the rails, one with the blindfold. Slim and the roan fought the first round in a whirling pillar of dust out of which they emerged with the roan sunfishing like a rodeo untameable, shifting to wild bucking round the corral.

There was no shouted slogan of "Ride him, cowboy," no words of either encouragement or even excitement, though the struggle was dramatic enough—while it lasted. The end came swiftly. The roan threw itself, and Slim took saddle again as it sprang up, foam flying from its bitted jaws, its hide streaked with sweat, eyes wild; rearing, starting a series of prodigious leaps.

At the third of these the cinch broke, and man and saddle went flying through the air to land with a dull smash while the roan went careering, triumphant at having rid itself of the burden it feared would master it. A rope sang and the roan was checked, snubbed to a post, flung to the dirt.

Two or three men, Raynor among them, advanced slowly to where Slim lay with the dust settling down about him. His head was tucked in like a turtle's and for a moment or two he was motionless. He sensed the silence, his brain working fast to a conclusion of foul play.

The cinch was nearly new, of good manufacture, a woven web that ended in the stout leather through which the ring was reeved. The latigo strap was of sound hide, pliable, well-oiled. He had inspected the saddle the night before to offset the lack of hospitality in the bunkhouse. Now he fancied he had better have left the inspection until that morning.

Instinctively, out of long experience, he had fallen on his shoulders and, while the breath was jolted out of him, there was no other damage done. He retrieved his gun which had flown from the holster, went over to the saddle and carefully looked at it.

"Hurt any?" asked Raynor and, to Slim, his voice held disappointment.

Slim did not answer him. He was looking at the latigo. The break—if it were a break—was curious. It was diagonal and, while such a thing was barely possible, from a badly cured hide, it looked more like a cut than a tear of fibers, except for the last inch of it. To Slim, someone with a thin blade had sliced slantingly into the leather with careful if diabolical skill, cutting on a long slant two-thirds of the way through, and then pasting or gluing it together, working in a little dirt and grease to hide the damage.

On a direct pull it might have lasted for hours. With a ramping, twisting devil like the roan it was a certainty that it would break within a few minutes, as it had, within a few inches of where the strap went under and through the latigo ring.

Slim exhibited it. Since his rage did not call for immediate action without a real target his southern drawl was pronounced.

"There was nothin' wrong with that latigo lahst night," he said. "I overhauled it myse'f."

Raynor stepped out truculently, backed by the presence of his men.

"You sayin' one of this outfit did that?" he demanded.

His hand hovered above his gun butt, but did not descend. Slim was eyeing him with a look that was cynically suggestive of past humiliation.

"I didn't do it, fo' a fact," said Slim. "An' I suah reckon it's goin' to be hahd fo' me to say who did it. I ain't the kind to go huntin' fo' trouble," he drawled while the lookers-on held their breath to listen, "but, in case I happen to run into it, I aim to ride it, same's I'm goin' to ride that roan hawss soon as I fix me a new latigo. I don't believe in showin' off none, but I—"

He stooped, all eyes upon him, and picked up an empty tobacco tin that one of the hands had tossed, empty, to the dirt. It was bright red and it made a brilliant streak as Slim suddenly tossed it into the air. The blued steel of his gun caught the light before fire spurted from the muzzle, and the tin, at the height of its flight, jerked as a bullet tore through it. Twice more Slim hit it in its zigzag fall, once again just before it touched the ground.

"What's thet play fo', if it ain't showin' off?" sneered Raynor.

"Jus' to express my appreciation of a practical joke—if cuttin' thet latigo was a joke. We'll let it go at thet, though there's been too big an audience here this mo'nin' to look jest right to me. There's two ways of bein' popular. I see a bull fight once at Juarez an' the *toro* was the mos' popular thing in the ring. He was there to git killed. I'll call this a joke, unless any hombre wants to announce it ain't. In which case," he added, and his voice rang like the stroke of an anvil, *"I got two shells left in my gun."*

"What's the matter?" asked Walsh, coming in through the gate that the lanky Englishman had swung open for him. "Anyone hurt?"

"Not yet," said Slim.

THE crowd had melted away with the exception of Raynor and the Englishman, tapping out his pipe on his heel.

"My latigo busted," said Slim. "You got a new strap an' a riveter? Thet roan's a likely hawss. I wouldn't wondeh but

what there was a little eagle in him somewheres.

"I'll git you a strap," said Raynor and disappeared. Walsh looked uncertainly at Slim, noticed the punctured tin and turned it over with his foot before he threw it out of the corral.

"Thought you might have started a shootin' scrap," he said.

Slim shook his head. "Jest the opposite," he said, and reached into his shirt pocket for the makings. Walsh crossed glances with him for a moment, hesitated and then offered a match for the quirly Slim completed with one hand. He said nothing, but Slim had read something in his eyes.

"She's told him," he decided. And walked toward the roan, now hitched to the corral fence. It snorted and tried to wheel.

"All right, my son," said Slim. "I ain't goin' to huht you. Jes' make you useful, *caballo*. You an' me are goin' to be friends."

The helpers came back with Raynor and the latigo with which Slim replaced the broken strap.

"I'll keep this fo' a souvenir," he said. "Let's git on with the roan. No need to blindfold him this time. He's part broke already."

He finished his morning's work without audience outside of the imperturbable Englishman, smoking his pipe. In him Slim sensed friendliness. Raynor left, and the helpers did their best. Four colts were turned into the right road for service before the triangle clanged for grub.

After the meal, with most of the hands absent on their various businesses, the Englishman joined Slim as he sat on a bench before starting in again.

"Good show, what?" said the other. "My name's Walters, Marvin. Didn't get a chance to talk to you last night. Turned in early. Had to go over the car after Miss Walsh brought it back. Quite a bit of a job.

"One of those blighters sliced your cinch," he went on. "They'll leave you alone after that shooting. Ripping stunt that. Most of 'em are blighters, y' know, an' Raynor's a blister.

"Mighty glad to have you here. I'm not much myself. Remittance man and a general rotter, but I like to see fair play. I'm not much on ropin' or ridin'. Never will be. Couldn't handle anything like that roan. Admire you—immensely. I'm the handy man. If you get what I mean. Fix the dynamo, mend the pump, overhaul the tractor and the old Lizzie. Regular tinker. What? Don't talk much, but want to say this. If you ever need a man at your back I'll try to be there. So long. Got a short circuit to fix. Loafed this mornin'. Wonder Walsh don't kick me off the place. Fact is, Miss Walsh is sorry for me. That's the sort of chap I am, Marvin. The women get sorry for me. God made them that way. I went the other way. To the devil, old chap."

He stalked off, and Slim watched him with friendly gaze. It was just as well to have someone to depend on at the T. P.—outside of Walsh—and he felt that Walters—if that were his own name—for all his self depreciation, had good stuff in him.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a difference in the atmosphere of the bunkhouse that night. Not all of it could be attributed to Slim's display with his gun. That, he calculated, would be most likely to affect the men of mixed blood, but, while they treated him with a certain half sullen respect, it was a silent one. After the supper meal they foregathered with Raynor at one end of the table and started playing monte with a pack of greasy cards. But there were others who nodded at Slim as they came in, while one or two spoke. These, it seemed, were not without their feelings of fair play toward a newcomer who had acquitted himself well. The outfit appeared to be split into two factions, those who blindly regarded Raynor as something more than foreman and those who remained neutral in their regular jobs. Walters, the Englishman, mute most of the time, sat next to Slim, offered him a well read magazine. Slim was no longer an entire outsider. Two hands had gone to town in the afternoon, and these he had considered as Raynor's immediate followers.

The fifteen stolen steers still bothered Slim, though he fancied he now remembered the man who had been called Chief. A vague memory of a voice across the poker table where he had spilled his check grew stronger, but he still felt that Raynor had something to do with the deal.

Slim kept his ears open to the general talk while he turned the pages of his magazine, reading automatically. Sometimes the page was obscured by a phantasmal illustration, nothing at all to do with the story, a picture of Belle Walsh's face, always with a sentence whispered in the back of his brain —"She told him about the fight after all."

Slim was far from a fool. It was plain enough, putting things together, that Raynor had some hold over Walsh, and that explained the reluctance of the girl to have Slim interfere. She knew of that hold, or suspected it. He had been her champion once and he stood charged to help her again. Slim decided that what he needed now was the combination of a cool head, good ears and a quiet tongue.

He had an idea that he had another friend outside the bunkhouse in Wing, the presiding genius of the mess-hall. More than once he had noticed the genial Chinaman regarding him with eyes that were distinctly approving. The cook might appreciate the scene in the corral, but Slim did not analyze the reason for the friendship. It might never come to more than an extra slice of apple pie, perhaps one for Pete, an inveterate lover of sweets. Nevertheless it seemed worth having.

There was some jesting with the foreman that struck Slim as not altogether void of sarcasm.

"Mighty nice of you to spend an evenin' with us," said one. "We don't often see so much of you. Ain't you goin' over to the Big House ternight?"

"Im shy of *dinero,*" retorted Raynor. "I'm takin' up a collection. You want to jine in?"

"I ain't much on Mexican games," said the other, and by the tone of his voice Slim had little doubt that this man, at least, resented a little the fact that he was working on an equality with men of mingled breed. Slim went on reading, listening. The gamblers' voices rose and fell. Raynor seemed to be winning on the turns of the cards. The four men at Slim's end of the table began to talk in comparatively low tones, but he heard them distinctly, though they apparently took it for granted that he was absorbed in his magazine. Walters, behind a cloud of smoke, set out his cards at Canfield.

"Wonder if they's anything straight about this revolution?"

"Revolution, nothing. They don't call 'em revolutions across the river. They call 'em *demonstrations.* They have to happen every so often. Old Porfirio holds 'em checked up so hard they're bound to buck.

"I mighty nigh got demonstrated agin' a wall one time. They kin call 'em what they durn please, but I'm tellin' you they spill blood an' fire when they git goin'."

"That's the time you want to watch out fo' a Spigotty."

"That's South American *wah-wah,* Greaser."

One of them looked a little apprehensively toward the other end of the table.

"To blazes with them!" said the speaker. "Spigotty, dago or greaser. You can't trust none of 'em."

"You're dead wrong there. Jest as good as any folks. 'Cept the breeds."

They agreed on that and Slim felt better. If there ever came a time when issue was taken against Raynor there would be more than one or two against his crowd. Six, counting Walters, not counting Wing.

"Probably git some news from town when the boys git back."

"I ain't goin' to wait up ha'f the night to git it."

"Hear thet rumor about the Cattlemen's Association?"

"What?" The voices dropped lower still. Slim believed the precaution taken more against the monte players than himself. He could still hear fairly well in scraps.

HE heard bits about the Night Hawks, about a big reward, a vigilante organization. And, piecing them together, he drew a right conclusion. He arrived also at a pretty definite conclusion that whatever there was of inside crooked work in the stealing of T. P. cattle, these four men were neither in on it, nor were they members of the more or less mysterious Night Hawks.

There was a near row at the table end. It was curious that none of the men he fancied as breeds had other than eminently American names. Raynor threatened one of Slim's helpers, called Taylor, snatching his cards from him. Taylor flourished a knife that seemed to come out of his sleeve, but dropped it as the muzzle of Raynor's gun came above the edge of the table.

"If I didn't need you," Raynor snarled, "I'd shoot the lungs out of you."

The other mumbled something and Raynor shot a quick look down the table as

if realizing that he had said something imprudent. He saw nothing that did not reassure him, and the incident passed.

Slim was genuinely tired with his day. He turned in early and soon Walters crawled into the bunk beneath him. One after another followed. The card game continued until someone protested loudly and forcibly from a bunk. Raynor went outside after turning down the lamp, but those who had played with him sat round the stove where wood was burning slowly. Slim, half asleep, felt the cold breeze as Raynor came in again with the two who had gone to town. It was late, he knew, by the shift of moonbeams on the wall. The lamp was out now, all had gone to bunk, but these three, and the room echoed with the varied snoring of the slumbering hands.

Raynor was talking in a low tone, using Spanish. Slim listened in, glad of his working knowledge of that tongue. He guessed the conversation the end of more vital matters discussed outside, but it was interesting enough.

"They might as well offer fifty thousand as ten," said Raynor. "No one will ever collect it."

"I'm not so sure of that. *Dios,* ten thousand American pesos is a big sum!"

"You thinking of going in for it?" came in Raynor's voice.

"Me? Heart of the Virgin, no!"

"Then keep watch on your tongue or you may lose it. A dog may eat it."

There was silence, the scuffling of men undressing in the dark, creaking of bunks, and silence. Slim did not go to sleep again that night. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money. One might buy a good outfit with half that amount. Even aspire to think of marrying someone with property rights of her own, for instance. And, if the collection included the elimination of Raynor? Why not?

The Englishman surprised Slim the next morning, finding a chance to talk apart.

"Hear those two chaps who went to town come in last night, with Raynor?"

"Yes. You awake?"

"Don't sleep much. Thought you might not be snoozing either. Your breathing was mighty easy over me. Hear what they said? Understand it?"

"Yes. You *habla Español?"*

"Yes. Not saying so round here. Rotten work going on in this county, Marvin. Some of it slops over on this ranch. Can't understand it all. Don't need to. They're rooking Walsh, and he's a decent sort. Sister is—well, she's sorry for me, let it go at that. I'm more or less of a rotter, but I draw the line at stealing—what? You're straight as a bit of string. Raynor's crooked as a hound's hind leg. Willing to wager his right name's more like Herrara. I've heard odds and ends, nights, when I'm awake, going over the bally mess I've made of things.

"Well, you heard 'em. These blackguard stealing cattle all over the shop call themselves the Nights Hawks. No one knows who belongs. Now the Cattlemen's Association are after them. And it looks as if our little pal Raynor might be one of the bally ringleaders. Seemed to be afraid a bit. What? Thought the other party might squeal. Ten thousand's a nice little parcel of spondulix.

"You and I, now, suppose we get a rumble about something? Land our man. More with him, maybe. What say if we go halves on what we collect? Both work together. I'm not quite the ass I look and almost anyone would look silly beside you and your gun. What price us, old scout?"

Slim could see that Walters had intended to let him in on the overhead talk, even if Slim had not chanced to know Spanish, and he warmed to the Britisher. Whether they would be able to trap Raynor and, through him the heads of the Night Hawks, was another matter. But it was worth trying, and he reflected that he had more than a suspicion he knew the man called "Chief."

He nodded.

"You're on, old chap? Righto."

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS Sunday morning and the outfit lounging generally. Some had gone to town, but most of them loafed, mending leather or clothing, cleaning guns, skylarking. Walsh was in Caroca, trying to make final contract for the sale of beef to the Mexican federal forces who were now camped close to the border. He had kept this quiet. Not even Raynor suspected the possibility of such a deal.

The T. P. riders gaped when a roadster came down the lane from the gate that

opened on the main road. There was a vision driving, alone, and most of them knew the lady, at least by sight. La Rose, in summer costume, stunning to their eyes, though her complexion, like her costume, was a trifle pronounced.

Slim, shaving meticulously by a mirror hung to a nail outside the bunkhouse door, saw her reflection and promptly drifted inside. He did not think she would be especially eager to see him, and his action was natural enough. La Rose had seen nothing of Walsh on the road or in Caroca. But she hesitated to call at the house, and drove on to where the men rose as one from the bench and off the top rail of the opposite fence. Those who had sombreros swept them off gallantly as she surveyed them with a smile. Walters stepped forward.

His manner evidently impressed her as a brand of politeness not common to the neighborhood.

"I've never seen you at the Cactus, have I?" she asked, her eyes roving for sight of Walsh, or Raynor, or Slim. She was still vindictive, but Walters, with his unaffected gentility, checked her a little. He was a distinct type. As a string to her bow he might be efficient. And she was a little afraid of him.

"I didn't know I'd find you there," he said, and got a dazzling smile for reward. "My error. Can I serve you?"

She was not quite sure whether he was mocking her or not with his melancholy eyes. Here was a man who had seen life. Remittance man, of course. But apparently working. A phenomenon. A puzzle that intrigued her—a little. She made up her mind to see more of him.

"I'm looking for Mr. Walsh," she said. "I rather think he expects me."

She raised her voice, which was well modulated, hoping that Raynor might be within hearing, knowing that some of these men considered her more or less the foreman's girl, sufficiently so not to try to mine his claim. The long Englishman with his horse-face, was different. She rather thought he'd cut in on Raynor if she tried to make him. Slim dropped out of her mind. The man called Taylor went in search of Raynor, currying favor, and found him looking at a wirecut on his horse.

"Johnny Bull's trying to steal yore gel," he said.

Raynor looked at him in surprise. "What's eatin' you?" he asked. "What gal?"

"La Rose. She's here in her John Henry. Come out to see Walsh, she says. Ses he was expectin' her."

"That's a damn lie." Raynor hurried off. La Rose called to him gaily. She was chagrined at the news of Walsh's absence, but she was not going to spoil her day. Raynor was the next best bet. To pit him against the Britisher might be better fun than the cowboy whose name she did not know. She considered Slim as dumb where women were concerned, anyway. He didn't matter so much with better game in hand.

Walters knew by bunkhouse gossip of Raynor's leaning. He was shrewd enough to debit La Rose with her desire for flirting and its complications. He had not trailed the world without acquiring wisdom. And he turned away, despite her alluring glance. Raynor caught it and his face grew darker. This was his girl. He did not relish interference and the word of Walsh rankled.

"Thought you weren't comin'," he began. "You're late."

La Rose gave him an admiring glance, gasping a little at his cleverness. She let him help her from the car, draw her away from the crowd.

"What's this about Walsh? Trying to start somethin' you can't finish?"

"You've no strings on me, Sled Raynor. You're hurting my arm."

"I'll twist it off if you try to make a fool out of me. Rollin' yore eyes at that British dude."

"He's a gentleman, anyway."

"Well, I'm not. As for that dude, I'll spoil him if he monkeys round you. Now then, what about Walsh?"

"He invited me out here."

"I don't believe it. If he did, why ain't he here to meet you?"

HE had to let go her wrist and La Rose was beginning to enjoy herself.

"I didn't set any special date."

Raynor's face began to twitch. "I'll tell him where he heads in. You, too. You lay off Walsh."

"Since when did you give me orders?"

"I'm givin' 'em to you now. You came out here to see *me,* sabe? We'll take a ride together in thet car of yourn, back on the mesa. I'll git the Chink to put up some lunch."

This did not suit La Rose. Things were not going as she planned. Raynor was asserting his masterful manner, and she felt something of the old lure of it.

"I'm not going," she said. "If Walsh isn't home I'll call on his sister."

That was bravado, but Raynor's coarse guffaw stung her pride and unleashed her temper.

"Think she's have anything to do with yore sort?" Raynor sneered.

La Rose, in a fury, slapped him across the cheek. Her jeweled ring struck the lip that Slim had split and which was barely beginning to heal. Blood spurted and, as La Rose started back, alarmed at the result of her blow, but still angry, Raynor started for her. But he checked himself, pressing the loose ends of his neckerchief to the cut.

"I'll fix you fo' that, you hellcat!" he said. There were flakes of fire in his dark eyes and his voice was low and deadly. The girl shrank further off, watching his clutching hands, suddenly afraid.

"You'll leave me alone. I'm through with you," she panted, forgetful of the cowboys, a dozen paces away, watching them.

"I'm not through with you."

"I know too much about you, Sled Raynor," she said, and her voice grew shrill with terror.

"Yah! what you know!" He stood in front of her, covering her from the little crowd in the front rank of which stood Walters, his left hand stroking his gaunt chin, his lank figure seemingly slack, though there was a light in his too often vacuous eyes. La Rose backed against the fence of the corral, at bay. Raynor had boasted to her that the hands at Tres Piños were his tools and, with Walsh away, she became panicky. Womanlike, she seized any weapon.

"We've got a new dancer at the Cactus," she said. "She's made friends with me. Calls herself La Paloma. She knows you."

La Rose had made no definite threat; it was probably that she suspected more than she knew, but Raynor's face turned to that of a devil as he heard the name of the girl who called herself the Dove. Far from a dove was Teresa Hernandez. A hawk, too wild even for Raynor to tame. It was she who had danced at the *cantina* the night Raynor had dragged Walsh away after the quarrel and the shooting.

"I'll slit your throat before it cackles too much," he said, his eyes bloodshot, murderous. "And La Paloma's afterwards."

She believed him, for all the sunny day and the onlooking cowboys. It all swam before her eyes a little.

"You'll swing for it," she gasped as Raynor made motion toward his belt, the devil inside of him rejoicing at sight of the frightened woman who stared at him in genuine horror. Neither of them noticed Walters strolling toward them. He'd scare her into line, thought Raynor; flash the knife on her. He drew it halfway from its sheath at his belt, then sent it back as La Rose cowered.

"I'll do better than that," he said grimly. "I'll send in yore name to the Night Hawks, my lady. They won't slit that pretty throat of yores, mebbe, but they'll do worse than that. You won't want to call yoreself La Rose after they git through with you."

She blanched under her rouge at the name of the masked riders of the night.

"Oh, my God!" she moaned as Raynor grinned at her.

"Rotten bad form to frighten a lady, Raynor, what?"

Walters wore no weapon. His hands dangled low at his sides. There was a flame in his light blue eyes that held Raynor for a moment before he stepped back, crouching at the hips, his bruised face cruel, his hand darting to his gun.

"You damned dude!" he said, and La Rose shrieked.

IT WAS Raynor's love of making a man cringe when he had the drop on him that saved Walters. The Englishman stood his ground as the foreman's gun came out of its holster and he let the muzzle nose its slow and deadly way upward. On the cry, Slim, his face clear of lather, his dressing finished, sensing the note of distress, sprang through the door of the bunkhouse, Colt in hand, taking in the situation as the cowboys stirred, the whole action swift as the turning of a hand.

"Raynor!"

The foreman half turned. He had Walters covered anyway, and there was an imperative accent to the calling of his name that warned him. He saw the glint of blued steel in the hand of the new hand. There were thirty yards between them, but fear laid a hand on his shoulder and his pulses slowed. In that instant Walters deftly

kicked the gun out of his hand. It went flying over the bars into the corral. The Englishman offered his arm in courtly fashion to the girl and she took it, glad of the support, as he strolled off with her. Raynor was left with distorted face, convulsed with rage, humiliated, conscious of the menace of the gun in Slim's steady hand, of Slim's watchful gaze.

Then the weapon was holstered, and Raynor strode up to Slim, fists clenched.

"Damn you!" he spluttered. "You're fired. I'll give you yore time. Git yore hawss an' fog out of here, pronto. The dude goes, too."

Slim laughed quietly. "I wouldn't think of leavin' till yore eye gits well," he said, softly. The words braked Raynor's fury. "Makes you look so't of one-sided," Slim went on, his head on one side as if he contemplated whether it would not be a righteous deed to restore balance by a second attack. "Man who hires me fires me," he drawled. "Thet's a rule of mine. I reckon Walters feels the same way erbout it."

"Walters'll have to wait till Walsh makes him out a check," said Raynor. "The two of you can go together." It was a lame way out of it, but better than none. Slim had worsted him. Walters and La Rose were walking toward a flower garden. Belle Walsh stood on the porch surveying them curiously. She had vaguely heard the shriek, from the back of the house where she had been in conference with Wing over culinary matters.

Raynor wheeled, lunged into a lane between two corrals. He entered one, retrieved his gun, saddled and mounted his horse and rode off toward Caroca, presumably to meet Walsh and ensure the discharge of the two hands.

Slim went back into the bunkhouse. He was still clear of La Rose, content that Walters had taken her off, though he did not suppose that the girl would want to have anything more to do with him. He had brought matters to a climax that might lose him his job. That did not worry him so much as the thought that his usefulness might be destroyed in aiding Walsh and his sister. It all depended upon how strong a hold the foreman possessed over his employer. Walsh would be loath to lose him, he felt certain. And Walters was a man hard to replace, with his knack with engines.

It would be all settled when Walsh got back from town. It was no use borrowing trouble, and Slim did not see how else he could have acted. Therefore he shrugged his shoulders and, gazing through a side window, saw a scene that rather staggered him. Belle Walsh was coming down the path to the gate. Walters, imperturbable, was halting to greet her, La Rose hanging back, uncertain of her reception.

The Englishman had secured the dancer's right name—and that was curious in itself, for no one else in Caroca knew it.

"Miss Walsh, will you permit me to introduce to you Miss Margaret Baker?" he said. The words were carefully chosen, and the emphasis as carefully placed. It neither offended La Rose nor deceived Belle Walsh. She looked a little searchingly at Walters and then at Margaret Baker. She took in the rouge, the gown, the perfume and, since she was far from a fool, it is probable that she placed the dance-hall attraction with fair accuracy. Perhaps she saw more than most people did. Perhaps it had not been all pretence when she had told Walsh she wanted to get out of it all.

And, besides, Walters was a favorite. Belle relied on his discretion in such matters. She was not narrow minded.

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Baker," she said. "Won't you and Mr. Walters come up to the house? It's pleasant on the porch."

LA ROSE went up between the flowers with her eyes moist, to the danger of their make-up. She was subdued and gentle and the hostess did most of the talking. She did not ask her guest what she was doing in Caroca, but she did find out where she came from, and soon the two were talking about gardens, with Walters, stroking his chin, between them. It was a curious conclave.

"I thought something had happened," Belle Walsh said once. "It sounded like a shriek, and that brought me out. It was fortunate I did, and saw you."

"Shriek of laughter, I rather think," said Walters. "Raynor was really humorous. Had to be for me to see the joke, don't you know!"

When La Rose left her voice shook a little. "I'm not fixed so's I can entertain you," she said, "but if I see any way of getting even, I'll grab it."

"She's just about an angel," she told Walters as they latched the gate, while wondering cowboys whispered and whistled softly.

These demonstrations ceased as the Englishman came up with the girl on his arm. They had seen a touch of his quality. And to cross him meant crossing Slim Marvin, still inside. Walters, unconscious of any hitches, told La Rose that he wanted her to meet his friend.

"Saved me from sudden death and all that, when Raynor started trouble," he said, and called Slim's name aloud, presenting him as Mr. Marvin. There was no enmity now in the eyes or the heart of La Rose. True hospitality had almost wrought a miracle.

"I'm glad to know your name," she said to Slim. "I saw you call the turn on Raynor."

Slim begged her not to mention it, while Walters slipped inside and came out buckling a gun belt about his waist.

"I'm going into town with you," he said to La Rose.

"How will you get back?"

"The Old Man has the car," he said. "He said he'd not likely be coming back till late. I'll find him. And you might run into Raynor."

She knew he meant Walsh by the ranch term of Old Man. And she hoped they would not meet him on the way. Things had changed since morning. As for Raynor—the fear of his threat was still upon her, though she had tried to shake it off. She knew its possibilities.

"If Raynor meets us?" she prefaced. "He's got it in for you."

"I know one end of a gun from the other," Walters answered laconically, and the girl felt confidence in his ability to take care of himself. He had placed himself in jeopardy for her sake greater than he would generally risk, she fancied. "I heard what Raynor was saying to you as I came up," Walters went on. "Don't you bother too much about that. A lot of that Night Hawk talk means nothing."

"You don't know," she said.

"Know quite a lot. They've rather shot their bolt, y' know. Cattlemen's Association after them and all that sort of thing. Don't you worry."

"I won't, if you tell me not to." She said it simply, without coquetry. "I don't know what Joe Walsh will think of me having visited his sister. He'll be furious."

"Why?"

"I imagine you can guess if you want to try. I'm not her sort. You know what I do for a living."

"Dance your feet off. Look here, Miss Baker, I'm glad to say that Miss Walsh is a friend of mine. I'm a bad egg and she knows it. I try not to be a cad, but I'm a long way from being a saint. A sight further off than you are."

"You're a man."

"There's jolly well no difference. Woman gets the worst of it, that's all. And I'm mighty glad that you are a woman, by Jove, I am! A friend of mine is a friend of Miss Belle's, or I wouldn't have introduced you."

"You mean you really want to be a friend of mine?"

"We'll start at that." She looked at him with the searching glance of a woman often deceived, but he met it imperturbably, with a little nod that warmed her.

CHAPTER VIII.

WALSH came back from Caroca, Walters with him in the car, triumphant. Thanks to Jaynes, he had been in touch with an empowered member of Diaz's staff and laid plans for a highly satisfactory deal. He was sure now of selling his excess beef at a good price. The Mexican federal troops were coming up close to the line at a point almost opposite Caroca. A tentative price and quantity had been discussed. He could get rid of all his grade stock and financially shelve his worries.

He was able to throw off his worry about Raynor to a great extent. The foreman had found him, demanding the discharge of Walters and Slim, and Walsh had effectively denied him.

"No time to talk about such nonsense, Sled. I've got a big deal on hand. Need every hand I've got. Let it blow over. I want you to deliver the stock to the reservation. I'll be busy while you're gone. It'll all be forgotten by the time you get back."

Raynor's eyes narrowed. He'd deliver the steers and collect the money. Whether he'd turn it over to Walsh or not, he was not so sure. He did not like Walsh's man-

ner. It was a little too confident. He seemed to be getting out of hand. But he said nothing more about firing Slim or Walters. When he had seen Walsh and the Englishman leave town he got busy in quarters that he knew as excellent sources of information, seeking to find out what Walsh meant by his big deal. What he learned caused him to grin complacently as he began to lay his plans. He, too, would have to be busy before he started for the reservation, so busy that he was willing to leave La Rose alone for the time being. He would take with him his own special crowd from the hands at Tres Piños. What he had to say to them after they got away would quite restore his prestige. It was late when he got back to the ranch. The next day he greeted Slim and Walters with a surly nod.

Walsh, telling the news to Belle, paid scant attention at the time to what she said about her guest. After she had gone to bed, however, he whistled softly and resolved to keep his peace. If Walters were really taken with La Rose his own little entanglement was over with. She was not a bad sort, he told himself. And Walters knew his own affairs best.

All he had to do was to time things properly. It would take Raynor all of ten days to go to the reservation and back. Ample time in which to round up, deliver, and collect spot cash for the Diaz contract, once that was signed. And he had leeway on the reservation delivery. Raynor would lay no hands on the Mexican pesos. He began, in his new found confidence, to almost believe that Raynor had been bluffing him. As soon as he had money in the bank he meant to start some inquiries about the man he had killed. With money he could employ the right people to find out the exact truth of the affair.

The reservation steers were rounded up, and Raynor departed. Apparently the foreman knew nothing of the projected sale to the Mexican commissary, and Walsh breathed a sigh of relief.

He summoned Slim to the ranch-house the night that Raynor left and told him of the deal.

"I'm making you acting foreman, Slim," he said. "Your salary goes up to ninety. May stay there. You don't know the place yet, but Harper does and he'll tell you where the stock is ranging. Three hundred head, including cows, at sixty dollars straight. War prices. Start rounding up tomorrow. We've a week to deliver. I can get some drivers later. We'll hold 'em in what we call Little Park, inside the wire. Don't have to cross the river. They'll take 'em over on this side. I'll go with you, of course."

Here was a different Walsh from the man Slim had first met, forceful and sure of himself. Slim rejoiced, not only for the sake of his new made friend, but on his sister's account.

She met him at supper and her mood was gracious.

"I've got a delayed acknowledgement to make to you, Mr. Marvin," she said.

"Oh, call him Slim," broke in her brother.

She hesitated, flushed a little, then did as she was asked, and the sound of his nickname on her lips was music to its owner.

"IT'S an apology as well," she went on. "I've told my brother about what happened in Owl Canyon. There were reasons for the way I behaved. Some day Joe will tell you about that, I hope. I'll try and make amends. Joe says you are to be acting foreman. You'll take your meals with us, of course, as many as you can, and come over evenings.

Here was heaven for Slim, striving to say the right thing and getting tongue-tied. She laughed at him, and after supper sang and played for both of them.

Slim found himself very much at ease, after the singing was done and Walsh busy at letters and accounts. She got him talking of hunting and fishing and showed herself as no novice at either.

He went back to the bunkhouse walking on air, building castles in the same unstable medium. And he was up at dawn, flinging himself into the work. Raynor and the Night Hawks were forgotten in the task at hand.

Followed glorious, crisp mornings with the steaks broiling and the coffee simmering, potatoes frying, biscuits in the camp oven, Walters installed as cook for the little outfit. Swift riding after the scattered bunches of barren grade cows, culling the steers, shouting across arroyos as the stock plunged to escape the roundup, and the ponies slid down on their tails or climbed like goats, as keen for the work as their riders.

And always, early, Belle Walsh, loping out from the ranch, doing her share on a wise old cowpony, almost as good as a man, staying till sundown, going back to the ranch again with a cheery wave of hand that Slim came to think was meant for him more than the rest.

She was more than making amends. He felt sure of that sometimes. She found opportunity to be with him through the day, and there were glances besides the hand waving when they parted.

Then Walters served the savory supper, and afterward told them in his jerky, effective way, many tales by land and sea, adventures credited always to someone else, but which Slim guessed were largely personal experiences. So to bed, tarp on the ground, blankets over and boots in with the owner to save frozen wrinkles in the morning. Sometimes Walsh stayed out with them. Two nights of the five he went home with his sister to be near the telephone.

By noon of the sixth day the full shipment was assembled in Little Park, a bowl in the breakdown of the mesa with a spring in the center and good feed between the sage and mesquite clumps. They were inside wire, but Slim ordered night herd. The day was sultry, and he did not like the look of the weather. He remembered the day of his arrival, the three pines standing out against the big cloud, the center one blasted, looking like a great gallows, and the downpour that followed.

THE stock was to rest quietly till the next day, set for delivery. Slim was responsible, and he took no chances.

"Storm may set 'em millin', if it comes after nightfall," he said. "There's enough of 'em to stampede, and I've seen less break plumb through three strand. Five wouldn't hold 'em. And we don't want to lose 'em the way other stock's been lost off this ranch. We'll split the night herd."

He was quite sure of the men under him. They were good hands, content with their wages and their jobs, and now beyond any possible influence from Raynor, if they had ever been susceptible, which he doubted. He supposed he would have to give up his authority when Raynor came back, but he was not sure of that. Walsh had meant something when he said his foreman's wage might be continued.

Storm masses assembled, seemed to dissolve all through the morning, and soon after noon the weather grew more ominous. Dark, slatey vapors piled up back of the mesa, the cattle were uneasy at their grazing, there was no air stirring, and every move of the men brought sweat from their skins. There was little to do, but he held them all for the night watch. Even Walters, who rode well enough. Walsh left before supper, approving Slim's plans, leaving them in his charge.

"I've got some phoning to do in winding up the business," he said. "Report things in good shape, for one thing, thanks to you. You won't stay a hand long, Slim, you know how to manage."

Belle Walsh had not come out. The Mexican commissary colonel, with one or two companions, were to come out to the ranch to inspect and pay over the money, and she had plans to attend to for their entertainment.

"Be sure to be on hand, Slim," Walsh said as he left. "Need you to help talk to 'em. I can't do it all, and you know the lingo."

"So does Walters. How about him?"

"Sure. Might have known he'd talk Mexican. Never says much, that hombre, but he knows a heap. Both of you show at lunch. Harper can run things out here till inspection."

It did not cool off at nightfall as usual. There was a mist over half the sky, and no stars visible. The air seemed heavy, compressed under the sheer weight of the black cloud mountains behind the mesa, over it now, with streaks of lightning flickering through the mass, and now and then a low rumble of thunder.

"She'll be more'n jest a cloudburst," said Harper. "When she comes we'll be swimmin' herd stead of ridin'. Yes, sir, we'll be duckfooted befo' mornin'. Who goes on first?"

"We'll shoot for it," said Slim, and the dice were rolled on a blanket by the light of the fire. Walters had got a pile of wood, enough for the night, an extra tarpaulin to keep it dry, though Harper vowed it would float off once the storm broke.

"I know 'em when they come this time of year," he said. "Reg'lar Noah's Ark floods. Think they was a lake over you an' someone pulled a slide out of the bottom."

Two men mounted and rode round the

dark mass of the herd. The sound of their crooning, melancholy songs came to the others, a word or two of the Cowboy's Lament:

"Oh, as I walked down the streets of Laredo,
As I walked there in Laredo one day!"

Tobacco glowed save where Harper softly mouthed his harmonica, the fire burned sluggishly and the clouds imperceptibly moved eastward.

"I got a hunch," said Harper as he tucked his harmonica away. "I sure got a hunch this is a hoodoo night. You heed me, hombres, there's goin' to be trouble at Tres Piños befo' mornin'. I felt this way befo'. Once was the night I went an' got married, an' another time we got mixed in with some rustlers an' rode the leather off'n our saddles fo' we got clear. 'Nother time——"

"Thar's frogs down in the spring to do the croakin'," said the man next to him laconically. "Go down an' jine 'em, cowboy."

"Trouble at Tres Piños!" The phrase stayed in the front of Slim's mind. He had used it himself, and now it came with a premonition he set down to the weather and his own nervousness in handling the cattle through the night.

THE two riders were walking their horses round and round the herd that stood unfeeding, snuffing, snorting and occasionally pawing at the ground.

Harper, not to be balked, started a new subject.

"Fine weather for the Night Hawks," he said. "If they got wind we had this herd here all ready to stampede, they'd save the storm the trouble. Drive 'em over the line an' sell 'em to the greasers. They'd buy. Price 'ud likely be better than a regular deal."

"What would we be doin'?"

"Shootin' off our li'l guns, one bullet to every fifty agen us. It's a Night Hawk night, I'm tellin' you."

Slim shifted uneasily. The possibility was not too remote. He knew the deal had been kept quiet, but there was no telling where it might have leaked. None knew the sources of information of the Night Hawks. It was said that there was at least one active member on every outfit.

"Jolly rum thing happened once down in the South Seas," said Walters as he made his pipe draw to his satisfaction. "In the New Hebrides, at a place called Aoba. Called the Traders' Graveyard, too. Only there were no graves. The natives who killed 'em buried 'em in their bellies. There was a copra planter by the name of Heywards——"

Silently Slim blessed the Englishman as the rest craned to listen to the yarn There was no sense talking about the Night Hawks. That sort of thing made for bad shooting if anything should happen. They would listen to Walters all night with his talk of pearlers and poachers, cannibals and wizards, club houses lined with skulls, and grisly tales of idol drums beating up for head hunting raids.

A few heavy drops fell, spitting in the fire, ceased. The gloom seemed to deepen. A livid tongue of flame that lapped the forward edge of the cloud showed it far advanced. When the rain came they would be in the middle of it. They dragged their slickers to them and put them on, while Walters yarned on.

CHAPTER IX.

THREE men came out in a car to Tres Piños that night, late, just before Walsh was ready to go to bed. Belle had sat up with him. Walsh had been uneasy at the gathering storm, consulting the ranch barometer that gave an ominous reading.

"I think I ought to go out to Little Park," he said.

"Why? Slim can do everything, can't he?"

"He surely can. Mighty good man. Too good to be a hand."

"I don't think he will be long."

"That's what I told him myself. Like him, Sis?"

He asked the question without special meaning and stared as he saw a swift blush sweep over the girl's neck and face. She nodded at him, conscious of her telltale banner of rose.

"By Jings!" he said softly. "Like that, is it? Couldn't suit me any better, Belle. I'd pick him fo' a brother-in-law without hesitatin'. He'll do to take along. But, dern his hide, he'll have to stay here at Tres Piños. I'll be Jinged I lose you fo'

housekeeper. Two men won't be much more trouble'n one, will they?"

"You're a bit premature, Joe," she answered him more composedly.

"Ain't spoken yet? He will. I've seen it in his eye. Saw it the night you sang in here. He's a bit shy. Best men usually are that way."

"Including yourself?" Belle parried, thinking that she had seen the look her brother spoke of long before. In Owl Canyon, even when she had snubbed Slim, for Joe's sake.

"Me? I'm cut out fo' a bachelor. I'm not shy. I'm too easy. Too liable to be taken in by some designin' female who wouldn't know a saddle tree from a waffle iron. Think we better leave it to Slim tonight."

"Of course. And you're tired."

"I am, Sis. Been under a strain. But I wouldn't wonder but what we were out—of the woods."

The Raynor matter was taboo between them by mutual consent. She smiled at him.

"I'm sure of it, Joe. Shall we go to bed?"

It was then they saw the headlights of the car outside, halting, shut off; heard steps on the porch. They looked at each other in a quick alarm. The dead Mexican, for all their affected cheer, stalked a constant phantom through the secret places of their minds.

Joe went to the door and admitted the visitors. Two were big cattlemen, the third the sheriff of the county.

"We're a bit late, Walsh, but it's important and we had to go to other places." The speaker was a tall, gaunt man with strong features, iron gray hair, mustache and goatee of the old-timer. It was Hesketh, a close friend of the elder Walsh while the latter was alive.

WALSH produced cigars, saw them seated. Belle, reassured by the talk of other visits, slipped out to make coffee.

"Won't keep you long," said Hesketh. "It's about this Night Hawks matter. They've got to be cleaned up. I'm representing the Cattlemen's Association in this. We came to an agreement at the last meeting. A special one. You weren't there. We didn't want to say what it was about in the notice. Can't be too careful of a leak. I trust my hands, but I'm hanged if I know or not whether some of them haven't been mixed up in it. Can't keep track of 'em when they say they're goin' to town. I suppose you didn't think it important, like the rest we've seen tonight.

"We want you in with us. We've voted ten thousand dollars to be given to the men who turn in the ringleaders. Understand there are three of 'em. One called the 'Chief.' We've got the funds and, if we hadn't, we'd raise 'em by special assessment.

"You've got that shipment rounded up you were talking about to me?"

He did not mention Diaz, but he was in Walsh's confidence. He had helped in the preliminaries. Walsh nodded.

"Holding them in Little Park," he said. "Deliver 'em tomorrow."

"Tidy amount there for you. Got a night herd? One you can trust?"

"Yes."

"We've heard a few things. You're in with us on this, of course? In your own interests."

Walsh hesitated as his sister came in with the coffee.

"My brother will join," she said. "We were talking it over the other night."

"Good. Thanks for the coffee, Miss Belle. We need it. It's going to be a bad night, and we may be busy. We're looking for some action tonight, Walsh. I'd ask you to come along; there's thirty of us ready for a start when we get back, but I recommend you to go over to Little Park, whether you're sure of your men or not. Never can tell when those Night Hawks'll swoop. They've probably realized their time is getting short. Bound to have heard what we're up to."

He leaned forward and shot out his question. "What do you know about your man, Raynor? Is he in charge of your herd at Little Park?"

Little bunches of muscle showed along the line of Walsh's jaws as he set them for what might be coming. He did not look at his sister.

"Why?" he asked. "Though Raynor ain't there. He's taking a bunch over to the reservation on the beef contract."

"Humph! Ever thought he might be mixed up in the steers run off from you? You told me it almost looked like inside work one time."

Walsh spoke slowly, picking his phrase. "I've got no evidence that way," he said.

"When did he start with the reservation bunch?" Walsh told him.

"Figure he ought to be there by this?"

"Ought to be there yesterday at the latest. Delivery's due tomorrow. They won't inspect till then. I didn't get the whole contract. They'll wait till it's filled from other ranches. I allowed two days for red tape. They use it plenty over to the Agency."

The three looked at one another and nodded. The sheriff coughed and spoke for the first time, jerking his head toward the third man.

"Pritchard, here, says he saw Raynor in town last night, or thinks he did."

"I ain't certain," said Pritchard. "I ran out of gas outside of Padilla's *fonda* an' went in to get some. Padilla's got a car. There was a bunch of men in the bar, talking Mex. Some of 'em went out as I went in. One of 'em sure looked like Raynor."

"That's all," said Hesketh, rising, bowing to Belle as he finished his coffee. "We'll be going along. Made time in the sheriff's car, but I wouldn't wonder if we all forked saddles tonight. It's going to be a wild one."

Gun belts showed on all of them as they stood up.

"Take my advice and go out to Little Park, Walsh," said Hesketh as they left. "An' take a good slicker along. You'll need it."

Walsh watched the car lunging off through the night, heard the first patter of heavy rain.

"You're going, Joe?"

"I think I'd better. Hesketh's advice is usually good. There's something on foot. If that Night Hawk bunch wants to make a quick haul before they get stopped, ours is a tempting proposition. Only five men with Slim. I hate to leave you alone."

"That's foolish. There's Wing. And nothing to be afraid of. I'll go to bed."

THE steers that had been destined for the wards of the Nation were herded in a narrow glen recessed on the mesa top, two days' journey from Tres Piños. Two men guarded them, though only one was on watch and he sleepily, cursing his luck at being left out of the fun.

As the rain began to come down hard he went over and woke his companion, setting his watch, the only one between them, ahead an hour. He had no intention of getting wet.

"It is not that late," said the other in Spanish. "You are a liar, Pedro, and if the moon was up I'd prove it to you."

"It's up, but you can't see it for the clouds, *compadre*."

"Then what in the name of God is the good of standing watch and getting drowned when you can't see the hand before the eyes. Let the steers watch themselves! They can't get out of the gulch It's wired."

"You wouldn't say that if Raynor was here."

"Raynor! He works for us tonight. Let us rest. It is an evil night. I heard an owl after I lay down. The worst of luck. If things go wrong it will not be with us. Here are fat cattle. We know the hidden way through the mesa. We might even take them to the reservation and get the money. We could say the storm hindered us."

"Luis, you have the brain of the archangel Michael. I will share what is left in the flask with you. Good *mescal*. And then we will rest."

With the tarpaulins left by their absent comrades spread over them the pair, riders in the pay of Tres Piños, members of the Night Hawks on picket duty, snored in unison.

CHAPTER X.

OUT from Caroca, clad in ponchos of oiled cloth, hiding them from chin to knee, save as they flapped in the gallop, like wings, a masked cavalcade swept through the dark, stormy night, racing toward Little Park where Slim and Walters, slickered, but with their gun belts outside, rode round the restless herd in their turn at night watch.

It was Slim who first caught sight of Walsh in a gleam of lightning that showed up the hides of the restless herd like wet satin, their tossing horns and restless eyes.

"Thought I'd ride over," said Walsh. "Everything O. K.?"

"All's well, so far. We're holdin' 'em. It's sure goin' to be a wet night. Everything all right to the ranch?"

"Yes."

"Miss Belle there alone?"

"With Wing. She wanted me to come."

Slim said nothing. A vagrant wish

came into his mind that she had not been left at Tres Piños without her brother. But there could be no danger at the ranch. Somehow he felt there was trouble in the night.

"We just went on watch," he said finally.

"Good. I'll ride with you."

"There's coffee by the fire, under a tarp," said Walters.

"Fine. But I——"

He never finished the speech. Out of the black night a horde of horsemen swarmed, a shouting mob that split about the herd. Guns fired, stabbing the gloom. Lightning flared and the rain poured down as men struggled out of blankets and sought their saddles.

Riderless horses careened, charging the stampeding cattle. Clang of breaking wire. Shot after shot. Seven men against five times as many. Fighting against desperate odds as the thunder rolled and crashed.

THE herd once broken, started toward the fence where the wire had been already cut to give passage to the raiders. Though many of them blundered against the wire in their frenzy from fire and storm, the rest poured through the gap toward which they were driven; while the majority of the Night Hawks seemed bent on exterminating the men in charge of the steers.

Whether they recognized Walsh, identified him as the owner, was hard to say. Tremendous bursts of lightning levined through the clouds or lit up their under surfaces and all the rain-soaked earth.

So brilliant was this display that it momentarily illumined all unmasked faces, bringing them out of the blackness as vividly as a photographer's flashlight.

Yet all this was so mingled with the speed and twisting of the horses, upflung necks, rearing bodies, men bending from their saddles to fire, or riding close to their mounts' manes while they reloaded, that distinguishing individuals was largely a question of chance.

Slim and Walters were the closest together when the rustlers came charging and shouting through the fence in their well planned offensive, surrounding the herd, driving them off, while they wiped out all witnesses of their crime. That Raynor was in this Slim did not doubt, and he guessed that the reservation delivery had never been made. The foreman and his followers had got wind of the sale to the Mexican federals and, knowing every inch of the terrain, had watched the gathering of the herd and waited until the last moment when they could strike most efficiently.

As he saw—while lightning glared a ghastly blue—the T. P. Steers leaping through the gap where the wire had been nipped, plunging through breaking strands that gave before their brutish madness or piling up against it in a living wave, Slim, firing at the ponchoed figures whose disguise made it easy to distinguish friend from foe, sought for the foreman.

Here was a man's affair. Raynor arrayed against Tres Piños would be fair game to Slim's gun. The hold Slim fancied Raynor held over Walsh could be wiped out and a good riddance. But all the raiders were masked with black silk kerchiefs tied above the bridges of their noses, hanging down to join the batlike ponchos. From beneath the short folds, hands were thrust to hold reins and shoot, as the robber cavalry systematically went about their butchery.

Not without their rebuffs. On his right Slim saw Walters coolly discharging his gun with deliberate aim, waiting for the lightning flashes that came in fast succession. The Englishman would probably never acquire the cowboy seat, but he rode like a polo player, weaving through the men who opposed him and sought to shoot him down in the wild turmoil of gale-flung masses of rain.

Slim felt the swift sear of a bullet at his right side, judged it had grazed his ribs, felt a warm gush of blood against the chill of his slicker envelope. His hat was gone, by bullet or wind, and the rain pelted at him, obscuring his sight, plastering his hair down on his forehead. What of the rest of his guard, of Walsh, he could not tell. Even Walters was lost in the mad mêlée now, but he saw ponies galloping by in the glares, their saddles empty, reins trailing, heavy stirrups clattering, and could not tell in the brief glimpse to which side they belonged.

His roan bucked, stung by a bullet, but it did not falter. A missile thudded into the wood of his left stirrup and splintered it, though it did not touch his foot. Now and then he caught the yells of the raiders. At first they had been meant to start the

cattle; now they were calling to each other to kill.

One loud voice bellowed close to him.

Spurts of flaming powder gas shuttled through the night, hell fingers pointing the way death had gone. There came the shrill neigh of a pony, mortally hit. A buffet came to Slim, not seemingly severe, as if someone had flipped the side of his head at his left ear. Almost instantly there came a numbness that passed away again, but blood was pouring down his cheek, to be washed off by the pelting rain. A lock of his hair, lank with the wet, had gone. The top of his ear was torn away. If he got out alive from these odds, these men intent on murder, balked in their desire only by the fury of the elements and the night, he would carry a souvenir of it to his grave. It was a close call. Death had literally whispered to him and passed on.

RAYNOR he could not find. How could he expect to? Despair blent with rage as he saw riders closing in on him, heard the near hum of the bullets they sent, while he, in the tense defenceless moment of reloading, broke his gun. Riding like an Indian, elbow crooked about the horn, crouching on one side of his leaping roan, he thrust cartridges into the cylinder with fingers that were stiff from the rain, clumsy, so that he dropped two of the shells he had taken from his belt and straightened up again with only four loads between him and the men who rode to surround him.

The last flash had shown the cattle all through the wire, displayed little groups where one or two men fired at half a score, perhaps broke through the ring with empty gun, perhaps went down—and not alone—to the soaking earth. Guns still cracked outside his own particular affray, his comrades were not yet all killed, though none of them could long survive.

"Clean 'em up!"

That came from the Night Hawks' leader with a flash from the side of his pony's neck. Came with a blow as the bullet bored its way through Slim's left forearm, numbing it so that he could barely hold the reins. He dropped them over his saddle horn and rode with his knees, swinging the snorting roan straight for the dark bulk whence shot and voice had come.

This was not Raynor, but it was the voice of the man who had been called the Chief in the corral shed.

The other reared his horse with spurs and curb to shield the shot he expected, but Slim, wild with the pain of his disabling wound, desperate in the knowledge that soon he must go plunging out of his saddle to oblivion, yet cool enough in his intent and its performance, roweled his own mount. The roan, knowing this called for supreme effort, charged the opposing steed with weight and battle squeal, with drumming hoofs and chiseling teeth.

The horse went down, and a shot came up from the ground as the leader crashed and fired upward as he struck dirt. Slim fired back to a target behind the flash, and the struggling horse pawed its way up and went charging off, dragging by one stirrup a man who would never pull trigger again.

One shot more—hit or miss he could not tell—a swerve in a wild hide-and-seek—only two cartridges in his gun—one arm useless—the roan tiring a little, perhaps from loss of blood—it was very close to the end. Slim wheeled a little in his saddle, he seemed to see the next flash of lightning through a veil. Down by the fence the cattle seemed coming back, leaping——

By the eternal God, these were not cattle but men, riding like the whirlwind, shouting cries of grim triumph as they came! No ponchos or masks on these.

"We've got 'em, boys. Yah-yah-yah!" The hoarse gutturals of excited men who sight their human quarry after long suffering and resentment, men who rode without thought of quarter or pity, hardened with the cruelty of justice.

The lightning was gone, but ray after ray shot white arrows into the night; winked out and on again. The cattlemen had electric torches that they switched on and off as they rode, their guns barking, biting, while they picked out their targets.

The eyes of the horses shone like great jewels as the rays picked them out, and then shot dazzling into the faces of the riders. Taken by surprise, then consternation as they knew themselves outmatched and their leader no longer able to rally or direct them, the Night Hawks sought safety in helter-skelter flight. It was every man for himself, pursued by the avenging posse of the Cattlemen's Association, the raid

broken, a failure, the boasted power of the Night Hawks snapped.

A lone rider, low in the saddle, raced past Slim, a dull blot in motion, until the lightning revealed him, every hair on the horse slick with rain, the man's black poncho like the hide of a broaching porpoise, his black mask roughly moulding his features, hat brim low.

ON the horse's flank showed the hip brand of the Tres Piños ranch—T. P. It was hard to be sure of color in that momentary glimpse of palpitating, fluctuating light, but if the horse were a buckskin, it was Raynor's, the one chosen by him for his first string pony in preference to his own. Incidentally it was the fastest horse on the ranch.

And Slim had seen something else that gave him fresh strength and energy to top the tide of relief that had come with the charging legion of the cattlemen—a wire scar, half healed, a triangular wound that was unmistakable. It was Raynor making toward the ranch.

He remembered that Belle was there alone—save for Wing. The scene in Owl Canyon projected itself on the screen of memory, Belle struggling in Raynor's grasp. Slim to the rescue—then, and now.

He felt the roan's quarter give a little as he wheeled him about on his hind legs, but the game and sturdy mustang leaped to the chase in full stride that seemed again unfaltering. Raynor was well away, lost in the darkness, but the roan followed a trail that his senses found, though Slim's could not. Behind them the shots and the shouting died away as they swept round the shoulder of a hill. The rain was ceasing, or passing over. The air was suddenly cold and sweet, and Slim responded to it, alert, forgetful of his wounds, of his loss of blood; a champion going to the rescue of the girl he loved.

He did not believe that Raynor thought he was being followed any more than he imagined he had been recognized. One faint flutter of lightning showed the foreman, well ahead, well forward in the saddle, using the most of the buckskin's speed. He was gaining on the roan.

"Let out a link, Petey." Slim bent and patted the neck that stretched out rigid as a bar.

Up went the roan's head, with an impatient movement that seemed to say, "I am trying." But it was plain that he was doing his best and that it was not equal to the pace of the buckskin. It was too far to risk one of Slim's two precious shots. He knew now that the bullet had either bruised or broken one of the bones of his left forearm. It was no more good to him than a stick. To reload without halting was impossible. Hard to accomplish with one hand under the best conditions. And the buckskin was drawing away.

Slim's buoyancy vanished like the gas from a punctured balloon. Unseen in the night, his face became gaunt and wan and old, strained, lined deep, while his imagination ran riot as to what the fate of Belle Walsh might be at Raynor's reckless, relentless hands that night. As best he knew how, he prayed.

The roan began to falter, to shorten stride, to go lame in its off hindquarter. When Slim patted its neck he had felt the wound, high on the crest, that first had stung it. But it was plainly hit in the flank or the quarter. Like himself it had been losing blood, and it was bearing his burden, straining every energy, working the great pump of its heart to the utmost.

"Petey, you got to make it—somehow. You got to, hawss. God, make him last! I can't do it afoot. That devil of a Sled'll get her. God, help us git through—an' damn him!"

CHAPTER XI

RAYNOR felt that he had got clear away from the disaster that had engulfed his companions, overtaken the organization of the rustlers, wrecked his own plans that he had devised so cunningly and given out to the members of the Night Hawks.

The men he had taken with him, when he left the two on watch over the reservation shipment, were by now either dead, badly wounded, captured. Dead, their presence would damn him, alive he knew they would squeal. His game was up in Caroca County, but he could still sting, like a crushed hornet.

He might be able to get away with the reservation stock—though not by delivering them to the Agency, for he knew the Agent there would have all the news before he could get there. He would have been warned, and offers of rewards would soon be made for him. He would have to rejoin the two and drive the cattle through secret mesa ways to where he could sell

them. That was risky, but possible. But his grand coup had failed, and he was an outlaw.

Walsh! He hoped that Walsh had been killed, and then hoped that he had not. He might still milk Walsh from a distance under threat of the penitentiary and the gallows. As for the girl—he had meant to marry her, to get possession of the T. P. ranch ultimately. The Night Hawks organization was only a temporary affair to him, a money supplier, a source of excitement. Belle Walsh he did not crave from any personal, physical choice. He would like to master her, but he knew he would soon tire of her. Girls like La Rose, like La Paloma, were more in his line.

But Belle Walsh. Here was his immediate revenge on Walsh, who otherwise might slip from his clutches if he had come out of the fight. Raynor had some money at Tres Piños, in the mattress of his bunk. He'd get that; there was a bottle there, as well, a flask of *mescal,* strong stuff that would put courage into a cripple. Quite a little money, winnings at monte. His share of raids, his private stealings from Walsh.

Damn Walsh! He'd get even. Damn the girl who flouted him and told him to stay away from the house! She was stuck on Slim Marvin. He was pretty sure he had put a bullet through Slim Marvin's head, but if he had been mistaken and Slim still lived, why he would be welcome to Belle Walsh—after Sled was through with her.

She would be in her room, asleep. Wing didn't count. Save that the fool Chink left the back door to the kitchen open of a night. No need to lock doors at Tres Piños, they considered, though he believed that Walsh locked the front door from force of habit every night. But the back would be open and he knew the lay of the house downstairs, he knew where the girl slept. If her door was locked—it would not matter. He would take her by fright and force, let her scream and scratch as she would—this time.

He had no idea that he was followed. He might not have much time for what he planned, but he would have enough. The fight was still going on. The cattle would have to be rounded up again, there would be long flight and pursuit. Walsh would wait to know his cattle were safe before he came back—if he was able to.

He reached the ranch headquarters, pulled up in front of the bunkhouse and got down from the half-blown buckskin. He did not turn on the light, but crept to his own bunk and found his cache, paper money in a compact package, the flask of *mescal,* from which he took long gulps, gasping, as the fiery stuff stung tongue and palate and throat while its fumes mounted to his brain.

Outside again, he listened, fancying he heard hoofbeats, deciding it was only the drip and splash of rain from roofs and gutters.

The back door was open, as he expected. He crossed the kitchen, feeling his way, striking some object against a pan of rising biscuit, stumbling over a chair. A door opened, a voice that squeaked a little called out.

"Who that? That you, Misteh Walsh?" Raynor tore off his mask.

"It's me, Wing. Raynor. Got a message for Miss Walsh from her brother. Just rode in from Little Park. It's important."

The Chinaman was plainly suspicious. He sniffed as if he smelled the fiery *mescal* on Raynor's breath.

"Missy Belle, she in bed, asleep," he said. "Whasse mally you no give message in mo'ning?"

"She won't stay in bed when she hears it," said Raynor. "You give it to her, Wing. Come here and I'll tell it to you. Don't want to shout it all over the house."

A little less doubtful, Wing switched on the light in his room, then in his spotless kitchen, entering in padded slippers to where Raynor sat on the table, swinging one leg, trying to appear nonchalant though he was chafing with the delay.

"Gimme a drink of water, Wing," he said casually.

HE caught the extended left arm at the wrist and pulled Wing to him. His gun barrel fell on Wing's head and the Chinaman crumpled up and fell like a wet rag, unconscious and bleeding. Raynor picked him up easily in his arms, flung him on his own bed, bound him and gagged him with strips of cloth he found in the kitchen. He turned out the light in Wing's room, locked the door, taking the key from the inside and keeping it. He picked up the heavy glass that had not broken when Wing dropped it, and poured into it half of what was left in the flask, swallowing it. Then he hesitated, and finally emptied the pint container.

Last of all, he turned out the kitchen

switch and stole through the pantry into the big living-room. The stairs were to his right.

Raynor listened at the foot of the stairs, hearing nothing but the ticking of a clock, water dripping in the kitchen.

With the face of a grinning fiend he commenced to climb, a dim bulk that lost itself as he progressed, little creaks of the treads proclaiming his slow and cautious progress. At the head of the stairway he paused again, turned to the landing's right and tried the handle of a door. It moved, but it would not open.

Bolt or lock held him. With an oath he stepped back. There was a little stir inside the room, the girl's voice calling.

"Who's there?"

Raynor made no answer. He took a backward step or two and flung himself at the panels, shoulder first. They gave a hollow sound, but they resisted. Cursing, he launched a kick with all his drunken might. Something gave, or started to give, and, with two more kicks, the lock catch tore out its screws through the splintering wood. As he came through the doorway with his leering face the room was suddenly bright with light. Belle Walsh had touched a button by the bed where she sat up from the pillows, her eyes shining bravely, a gun leveled in her hand at the intruder.

"Put up your hands, Raynor, or I'll shoot," she said, and, as he lurched forward, pulled the trigger.

The shot went wild. Raynor had moved too swiftly, snatching a cushion from a chair and jerking it in the same motion fairly for the bed. While she flung it aside he reached her, wrested away her weapon.

"Yah, you an' yore popgun!" he jeered. The girl drew the quilt about her, her eyes widening as she began to realize she was at bay against this beast.

There was a slight scuffling sound on the stairs. It ceased. Raynor turned slowly, wondering whether Wing could have managed to get free, a little stupid, his brain sluggish from the quantity of strong alcohol he had taken so rapidly into his system. Behind him, the girl cowered, hope lighting her face that swiftly dulled again as she saw Slim, his hair lank about his forehead, one side of his head bloody, blood dripping to the floor from the useless arm, reel against the doorframe. His eyes were set, his face racked with pain and exhaustion, as he strove to summon the reserve he had already drained heavily.

Raynor laughed.

"Here's where the best man wins, Slim. An' where you lose, damn yore soul!"

He fired, deliberately, just as a blaze was beginning to come into Slim's tired eyes. Belle screamed and Raynor fired again at the figure slumping to the floor. The wounded arm was put out as uncertain prop to the failing knees. Slim's face growing gray as the blood drained away behind the tan. Lips, opening a little, shut again as the jaws clamped and from the floor, streaking upward, there came a spurt of fire—another. The emptied revolver clattered, sliding along the floor, stopped by a rug where Raynor clutched the fringe convulsively as he strove to rise—and could not.

Slim propped himself by the door frame. His voice sounded hollow as the voice of a ghost.

"Got—here—in—time. Reckon—I—jus' made it—honey."

CHAPTER XII

SLIM blinked at the room. Daylight now, and he was no longer by the door where he had slumped when Raynor's shot got him in the shoulder. The second had missed as he had fallen. Or maybe he had got Raynor first. Anyway he had got him.

Same room, but he was in bed. In——?

Someone came over from the window and stood beside him.

"Good man, what? Got your eyes open, have you? Got to keep quiet. Doctor's orders."

Slim opened a mouth that seemed somehow rusty at the hinges, moved a strangely feeble tongue and spoke in a foolishly weak voice.

"Raynor?"

"You're not to ask too many questions, old chap, but I'll tell you what you've got to know."

"You better, or I'll run a high fever."

"I'm not your only nurse, old chap. I'm just relief. Mealtimes you've got a better one than I am and she's a regular tyrant. What? Be on duty in a few minutes.

"Raynor? You nearly put his light out,

but he wasn't quite dead when the crowd got here. One chap they said was the leader was shot through the brain."

"I shot him. They called him Chief. He was a chap named Kirk. Won my money down at the Cactus. I recognized his voice. Couldn't see his face."

"It was Kirk all right. And that ties you up with another chunk of the reward. Seems I bagged the third man they were after as the jolly old ringleaders. He was dead, too. The chaps were a bit excited. Three of our chaps got hurt besides four or five of theirs. So they took Raynor while there was some life left in him, and hung him up to the middle one of the three pines.

"None of ours killed. Harper's the worst off, and they say he'll pull through. You remember Miss Baker? Used to dance a bit at the Cactus? She is out here helping to nurse the boys over in the bunkhouse. By the way, she and I are going to get married next month. Congratulations in order and all that sort of rot. Thanks, old chap. Don't tire yourself by talking. You can talk to your other nurse in about three minutes, all she'll jolly well let you.

"You see the reward was worded ten thousand dollars for the apprehension of the three main johnnies or for such information as shall cause them to be apprehended. Something like that. That makes three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three and one-third cents for me, and six thousand, six hundred and sixty-six——"

Slim interrupted him. "Nothing of the kind. Halves or nothing. Our agreement was to split."

The Englishman nodded.

"Correct. Mighty sporting of you, just the same. We got all the cattle. Turned 'em over next day. Some of them were a bit cut up, but they were all for commissary, and the troops didn't seem to care. Walsh got the money. Everything is happy and the old goose honks aloft, you know. Wing got a crack on the jolly old bean. That's healed up days ago, though he insists on wearing a bandage round the cocoanut. Badge of honor—what?"

"Hold on. Days ago? What's the idea?"

"Nothing but the natural flight of time. It will wing, old chap. You've been in bed for ten days. Doped up a bit most of the time to give the patches a chance to graft in." He looked at his wrist watch. "Sorry, but my time's up. She's always punctual. You're a lucky dog, Slim, but you deserve it."

There were light footsteps outside and Walters placed a finger to his lips.

"Mum's the word, old chap. I haven't told you a thing. Let her do it all over again." He nodded again and winked, slipping out of the door as a girl in crisp, white linen came in. She was not a nurse, because she wore no cap and because she broke all regulations by giving a glad cry as she saw Slim's eyes open.

"Slim!"

The kiss, which was mutual, was quite spontaneous. So were those that followed.

"I can't put my arms round you, honey," Slim finally said. "Seems neither of 'em work real well." A statement that was corroborated by two fast healing perforations, one in the left forearm and another through the right shoulder, enough to have spoiled any man's shooting, but a lover's.

Belle Walsh responded as he wanted her to, though she protested it was against the doctor's orders for him to be excited.

"Excited, honey? If you jest knew how rested I was. Specially about money."

"Money?" She thought he was getting delirious, but his eyes laughed at her.

"I've got nigh five thousan' dollars comin' to me, honey. Enough to buy into a ranch, mebbe, or start one of our own."

"It wouldn't have made any difference, dear," she told him. "Not to me."

Slim sighed happily.

"It sure would have to me. Now I'm goin' to hurry up an' get well. Walters tells me he's goin' to get married nex' month. I don't see why I should be left out in the cold like that, jest because I happen to be sick fo' a spell."

"You are not to talk about anything exciting. If you do, I'll leave you."

"That'll excite me mo'."

"I've got something that will put you to sleep, sir."

"You wouldn't try to make me take it."

"Would you refuse me anything?"

Such talk is silly to those not taking place in it, but it was eminently satisfying to both these two.

THE shadow had passed from Tres Piños. La Rose—Miss Baker now, until she became Mrs. Walters—had got some hints from La Paloma that Raynor had deceived Walsh into thinking he was

a murderer, but she declared that she hated all gringos and would not testify to anything definite. It was Wing who came to the rescue when Belle questioned him.

"Allee light. I talk now. Night Hawk all gone. Layno', him dead. Chinaboy not aflaid now. I speakee. Layno' all same make fool of boss. One time boss get too much dlunk, go along with Layno' one place. Catchee mo' dlink. This time no good. All same dlug. Sabe?

"Then boss get in low. Layno' he take boss out—too much dlink, too much dlug. No sabe what happen. Layno' tell him he kill man.

"Man not kill. All same bad man sheliff he likee catch. Boss pay money. Layno' he give some this man. He go Mexico. Boss he think all time he kill him."

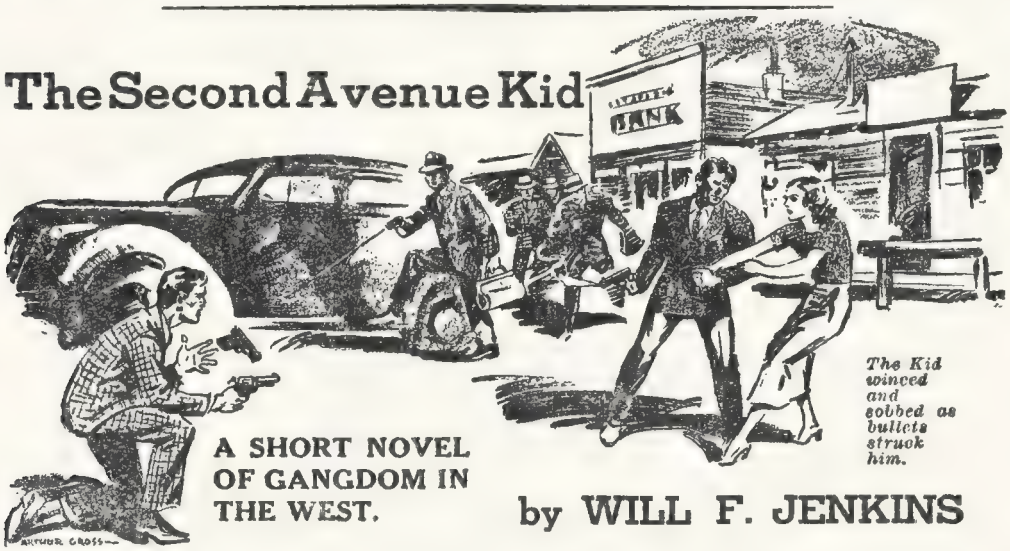
"How do you know this, Wing? Can you prove it?"

"Suah. Can do. Catchee witness. L'l Mexican gal. This gal, her auntie, she belong along this place all happen. Gal she that place along that time, too. Bimeby my cousin he mally that gal. Velly foolish but he in love. Then evellybody damn fool. Waltehs, he damfool—" He checked himself.

"Slim, I don't think him damfool. Missy Belle, suppose he fall in love along of you. He allee same fine man, lide like hell, fight like hell. I think he makee love same way."

Which recommendation may or may not have had something to do with the finale of this story. Which ends—even as it does in the movies—in a clinch.

The Second Avenue Kid



The Kid winced and sobbed as bullets struck him.

A SHORT NOVEL OF GANGDOM IN THE WEST.

by WILL F. JENKINS

"YOU—wiped blood off my hand," the girl said suddenly. "I would have been arrested if that had been seen. I'm—grateful to you for wiping it off and trying to keep me from knowing about it. But—you'd better go away, I think. Nobody has asked you any questions, yet. But they'll think about your being shot, and that you were the first one to pass between the cars after the—man that was killed. They are going to suspect you, they are going to arrest you—"

"But nothin' worse than that," said the Kid. His eyes were suddenly mocking. "Lady, y'tippin' me to leave town. I'm tellin' you. Before I leave town there's goin' to be trouble poppin'. I'm advisin' you, earnest, to stay indoors as much as y' can for th' nex' few days. Especial, I'm advisin' you not to go near the bank—any time. As for that fly cop, instead of his gettin' me in trouble—"

The girl looked at him steadily, though her face was growing a trifle pale.

"What?"

"I'm arrangin'," said the Kid grimly, "so he's headin' for th' Pearly Gates at sixty miles an hour! An' I'm goin' to arrange it thorough!"

AND THE KID MADE ALL THE NECESSARY ARRANGEMENTS!

Don't miss this swell yarn in the April issue of

DOUBLE ACTION GANG

NOW ON SALE!

MEXICAN GOLD

by RUSSELL HAYS

A Badman Guesses Wrong and Gets a Bellyful of Lead for His Reward

DELANEY had climbed over the corral fence to enter the livery stable by one of the small side doors back of the stalls. He stole into an empty stall and peering through a crack in the partition could see the yellow glow of the lantern hanging over the barn's high front door.

He stood listening, his angular face as lacking in expression as a mask. His thin tawny eyes fixedly staring.

The two Mexicans who had paid for their meal at the Bonito with a twenty-peso gold piece, were sitting their horses in the shadows at the rear of the wide driveway while they talked softly with diminutive, spider-eyed Jacinto, hostler and half owner of the feed barn. Delaney could only catch a word now and then. The two riders were telling Jacinto what to do and when to do it, no doubt about that. Delaney eyed their horses with a covetous tightening of his lips.

"No brand on 'em," he was thinking. "Racetrack stuff the rebels glommed over at Agua Caliente. Damn fools to be bringin' 'em this side the border."

Damn fools, too, to be flashing twenty pesos gold in the Bonito! Yet they weren't soft spots, either. Delaney had a feeling he had seen the blue-eyed one somewhere before. There weren't a whole lot of Mexicans with eyes like that. His outfit looked a great deal like a rurale's. Delaney wondered if he might be an officer in the rebel army which the Federals were slowly but doggedly shoving back toward the border.

It bothered him, this sense of recognition coupled with his inability to place the man. It might change his plans. He had already decided to follow the two, to come up with them somewhere out in the desert; and, if conditions were right, to relieve them of the dinero he felt certain that they were carrying.

As he continued to peer through a slit in the manger, he saw the blue-eyed Mexican reach down to Slap Jacinto affectionately on the shoulder; saw the man's white teeth flash in a careless smile, and Jacinto's flash in turn. There was a soft clink of coins passing into the hostler's scrawny hand.

"And if any should ask which way we have gone," said he of the blue eyes, in Spanish, "Why, of course, Jacinto, you will tell them." He chuckled at his jest.

"Certainly," said the hostler, and chuckled also. He sorted the coins into the pockets of his loosely hanging vest. "Hasta la vista!"

"Adios."

The hooves of the racers thudded on loose boards as the two reined around to ride out the door at the rear of the stable. Jacinto closed it after them, and stood for a moment by the open window, staring out into the high-domed desert night.

Delaney crouched down behind a manger as the little hostler moved back toward the front of the barn. He could hear the Mexican whistling a dance tune softly as he passed him. Jacinto seated himself on a box just outside the wide front entrance and rolled a cigarette. For several minutes. Delaney stood watching him, cat-eyed, musing.

The American thrust his lean hands deep into his empty pockets. He nodded his head grimly and stole toward the door of the stable.

Jacinto looked up from pleasant contemplations to see the gaunt gringo stranger come silently around the corner of the grain bin. The hostler was startled.

"Como esta?" he hissed.

"It's just me," grunted Delaney. "Where's my horse?"

Jacinto was reassured by his manner. He had been rimmed out of his feed bill by deadbeat Americanos before. And this one must be a deadbeat also, else why would he be eating frijoles and tortillas at the Bonito at twenty cents a plate?

"To-night you pay up, si?" Jacinto questioned. "Four days, six dollars you owe now."

"Sure, I'll pay," said Delaney off-handedly. He thrust his fingers into his empty watch pocket. "Go ahead—get me that roan of mine."

The Mexican, half convinced that Delaney had the money, lighted a lantern and led the way over to a north stall. Delaney patted the outstretched muzzle of the long-legged none too well fleshed horse which

Jacinto brought out to saddle. Delaney tested the cinches. He stepped around beside the Mexican and jammed the muzzle of his gun into the man's middle.

"Keep them hands where I can see 'em!" he hissed.

He reached over and lifted the short, tip heavy knife that was sheathed beneath Jacinto's left armpit. Slipping the blade inside the latter's waistband, he slashed through the belt and top of the hostler's Levi's so that they came tumbling down about his bony shanks. Jacinto's spider eyes grew murderous.

"Santa Maria—you pay for this," he breathed.

Delaney placed the edge of the knife against the hostler's throat. "Where was them two amigos of your'n headin' when they left here a minute ago?" he asked tonelessly.

"Amigos mios—no!" said Jacinto, and shook his head energetically. He thought a while, then added glibly: "I hear them say, though, that they ride south across the border."

"Yeah?" whispered Delaney. His tawny eyes stared dully at the Mexican's face. "You mean they're goin' north by Morelos basin, don't you?" The sudden terror that flashed across the other's face told him that he had guessed right. "What I wanta know is the name of that blue-eyed hombre, an' where he's headin' with all that dinero?"

Jacinto gave a choked cry. He clawed wildly at the hand pressing the knife against his throat. There was a brief struggle. The lantern gleamed evilly on polished steel. The hostler cried out shrilly once; a cry like that of a rabbit that feels the snap of pursuing fangs. Then he slumped down against the wall, his own knife buried to its hilt in his skinny shoulders.

"Huh—I never figured he'd go at me like that," muttered Delaney.

He knelt down and went through the hostler's vest. The pockets yielded an even dozen of twenty peso pieces. There was nothing else of value on the body, not even smaller change. Delaney placed the money in the buckskin belt inside his shirt. He led the roan out the back door of the stable. He swung into the saddle and sat for a moment considering. No one had come to investigate the hostler's cry.

"There ain't no sense in a man ridin' on an empty stomach," he told himself.

He made his way by a circuitous route to the rear of the Rancher's Cafe. Tying the roan in the shadows of a mesquite clump, he filled his waterbag from the tank at the rear of the restaurant, hung it on the saddle horn, then circled to enter the building by the front door. Not until he had seated himself at the greasy counter did he discover that he was being covertly watched by a stocky, red faced man, who with two companions, was seated in one of the narrow booths built against the east wall.

Delaney swung around on his stool. "Hullo—Gombel," he greeted woodenly.

"How's tricks, Delaney?" answered the other. As he raised his arm to shovel his spacious mouth full of food, the man at the counter could see the gleam of the U. S. Marshal's badge on his shirt.

"They could be worse," Delaney admitted.

He turned back to carve on the steak the waitress had placed in front of him. Somehow, it had lost its flavor. Delaney was almost regretting that he had not ridden off on an empty stomach. Not that Gombel had anything on him. All Gombel had were suspicions. He'd had them for several years now, but that was all the good they had done him.

Yet some day, Delaney knew, if he continued to work along the border, Gombel would pin an airtight case on him. He wasn't a fool, and he wasn't trying to fool himself. It was just the law of averages.

Gombel showing up here at Los Hermanos at such a time drove the realization home. Delaney gulped down his food. Even though they couldn't prove he had done in the greaser, he was reflecting, the Law would soon be wanting to question him. They would know that he had had his horse stabled there. He was thinking that he would keep on riding until he had put a couple of states behind him.

He got up hurriedly, stopping at the cash register to settle for his meal and to buy half a dozen sandwiches to take with him. He tendered one of the gold pieces. The old desert rat who ran the Rancher's examined it critically.

"You got no American money?" he complained.

"No, I ain't," said Delaney. He wished that the old man had not protested so loudly. Looking into the narrow mirror back of the counter he could see that Gom-

bel and his two deputies were staring over at him with sudden renewed interest. "Damn it all—what are they doin' here in Los Hermanos, anyhow?" he asked himself.

The old man finally gave him his change. He stalked out. Delaney stowed the sandwiches away in a saddle pocket. He stepped into the saddle and rode boldly off up the main street. Los Hermanos slumbered on into the night.

A few miles out of town the road forked. One branch ran south to old XT ranch. The other branch turned north across the desolate, wind swept floor of Morelos basin. Delaney followed the latter. The moon had risen since he had left town. It leered down malevolently, a huge, golden, misshapen globule.

Delaney twisted in his saddle to look back at the town. The lights had dwindled to small twinkling dots. He stared harder into the vague moon silhouetted outlines of the night. Someone was riding along the road behind him. He could barely make out deeper, slowly moving blots of black.

"It couldn't be nothing else," he muttered. "Dammit, I wonder if Gombel could be trailin' me?" His lips pushed out sullenly.

He rode on. There was little else he could do. He kept looking back. At times the riders behind him seemed to have disappeared. He was beginning to hope that they had turned south toward the XT, when he picked them up again. He urged the roan to a faster pace.

Common sense told him that Gombel, or no one else, could have pinned the knifing on him this soon. Reason said that it was unlikely that the Mexican's body had even yet been discovered. Yet at the same time, some sixth sense was telling him that it was himself rather than coincidence that had set the riders on the road across the basin.

The hours sped by.

The basin walls spread farther and farther apart. The road grew more rutted and sandy. Giant cactus towered over the wasteland, and in the gullies smoke trees reared their spiny limbs in ghostly banks of grey.

The hooves of the roan pounded along rhythmically. Delaney wondered how far ahead the two Mexicans on the racers might be. Far enough, perhaps, that if they suspected he were following them, he would never come up with them.

In his own mind, he had long since accounted for the supply of Mexican gold which they were obviously carrying. It was the racers which had decided him. He had read of the Agua Caliente racing stables being cleaned out to supply mounts for the officers of the rebel army. The rebellion hadn't been going over so well of late. The Federal army had been winning its battles with discouraging consistency. It was consequently high time for the leaders of the cause of freedom to be thinking of that not so distant day when they would again be seeking the welcoming haven of los Estados Unidos.

Hence, what was more logical than that they should send a goodly portion of their loot north to be banked? What had particularly appealed to Delaney, however, was that the American authorities would have no knowledge of what was taking place. And, further, that the rebel officers having lost their loot, would hardly feel like reporting their loss to custodians of law and order on this side of the line.

The moon rose higher and higher. Looking back, Delaney could see no sign of the riders who had been behind him. Nor looking ahead, could he see any sign of those who had gone before him. But he was certain that this was the route they had taken for he could clearly make out the hoofprints of the racers.

The basin was pinching in again. Guaymas springs would be a few miles ahead. Dawn was breaking shell pink beneath the cloudless blue of the sky when Delaney rode down into the tiny amphitheater that held the springs. At one time there had been an adobe ranch house there. Now all that remained were a few crumbling walls shadowed by leaning, bushy topped cottonwoods.

A nearly colorless streamer of smoke spiraled up from a camp fire below the springs. Two horses with the sleek lines of thoroughbreds were staked out to graze on the parched grass. Delaney rode boldly over to the fire. The two Mexicans squatted beside it looked up at him curiously.

"Buenos dias," said he of the blue eyes. His lips were smiling. His eyes were cold and unblinking.

"Howdy," said Delaney. He glanced up at the lightening sky. "Looks like it's goin' to be another hot day."

The blue-eyed man nodded in agreement as he pushed a makeshift coffee pot to one

side of the fire. Delaney could see that his companion was studying the roan, was probably recognizing it as one of the horses he had seen stabled in the livery barn back at Los Hermanos. That wasn't so good. He rode on over to the small pool of the springs. The roan thrust its muzzle thirstily into the pool's crystal mirror.

Delaney loosened his cinches and staked the pony out where it could scavenger a few nibbles of bunch grass. Munching a sandwich, he strolled back to the fire.

"Didn't I see you fellows down at Los Hermanos last evenin'?" he questioned casually.

The two by the fire exchanged glances. It was plain to Delaney that he of the blue eyes was the leader. The other, full cheeked and brooding eyed, was taking orders.

"You saw us there?" the first man countered.

"Yeh; wasn't you eatin' in at the Bonito?" said Delaney.

He looked down at the pearl handled guns strapped about the man's flat hips. With eerie suddenness it came to him where he had seen the Mexican's likeness. It had been beneath the word "Wanted." The man was better looking than his picture. The man who looked up at him from over the coffee pot was none other than el Halcon, bandit chieftain, rustler, and killer wanted on both sides of the border!

"Si, we ate our dinner there yesterday," said el Halcon. Tiny metallic glints of mockery played in his pale eyes.

Delaney wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. He had a queer feeling that the Mexicans knew he had followed them and why. It came to him that, if this were the case, there was little likelihood of his ever getting the drop on them. Little likelihood of his ever getting the drop on el Halcon, anyhow. And if he did, what then?

Delaney's gaze shifted restlessly about the small lava walled pocket. He noted that the saddles had been left on the horses grazing over in the old corral. Whatever loot el Halcon was carrying would likely be in the saddle bags. The American's mind conjured up a picture of leather sacks filled with twenty peso pieces. He would need a stake like that if he were going to quit the country. He couldn't turn back now. Not after he had come this far.

He squatted uninvited beside the fire. The plump faced bandido held out the coffee can. Delaney shook his head. He was thinking how neatly a man could be shot while his head was tipped back drinking.

"Don't care for none right now," he said.

El Halcon raised his blond brows in polite inquiry.

Delaney scowled. "This country seems to be gettin' right thickly populated," he stated.

"What you mean?" asked El Halcon quickly.

Delaney shrugged. " 'Tain't often I run across't anybody campin' here. And 'sides you, they was somebody ridin' this way along the trail back of me last night."

The Mexicans got his meaning. El Halcon smiled. "Looking for you, amigo?"

"Or—for you?" asked Delaney.

They sat silently, staring bleakly at one another, endeavoring to read each other's thoughts. The sun crept up to the crest of the Botellas and peered curiously out across the basin. El Halcon came suddenly to his feet.

"I think, Diego, it would be well if you were to ride up to the ridge to see what you might see," he said in Spanish.

"Si."

The somber-faced man gulped down the last of the coffee. He hurried over to catch one of the racers, and rode back along the trail by which Delaney had entered the pocket.

El Halcon gazed thoughtfully after him. Delaney looked down at his fingers and saw that they were trembling. His hand swept casually back toward the butt of his gun. With a gliding motion like that of an untwisting rope, the bandido turned back to face him. El Halcon's sinewy fingers clutched the pearl handle of one of his guns. The silver plated barrel pointed at Delaney's stomach.

"You know who I am?" he questioned softly. His pale eyes clashed with the Americano's tawny, squinting ones.

"Hell no," grunted Delaney.

The Mexican smiled, a slow mocking smile. "No?" He shook his head. "You didn't follow us?"

"Followed you, nothin'," growled Delaney. "You an' me's got nothin' to scrap about. I had to leave Los Hermanos in a hurry. They was some U. S. marshals come to town. I know this country in north of here."

El Halcon spun his revolver on the trigger guard, gripped the butt again with a

jabbing motion. He scowled. "It might be —that you tell the truth," he said half to himself. He stepped around behind Delaney and lifted the latter's gun to drop it in his own holster. His predatory instincts asserted themselves. His searching fingers found the money belt strapped inside Delaney's shirt.

"Give it to me."

Delaney's brows knitted. He hesitated. Finally, he unbuckled the belt and held it out. He turned to watch the Mexican as the latter dumped the gold pieces out into the palm of his hand. El Halcon's pale eyes grew very small. "So you have seen my friend, Jacinto?" he questioned. "No?" He commenced counting the coins.

Delaney had a tremulous feeling in the pit of his stomach. His body was taut as finely stretched steel. A fine sweat had come out on his chest. He wondered how long El Halcon would play with him. His mind seemed grown apart from his body. He saw the Mexican drop one of the coins, reach instinctively to pick it up. He saw his hand reach out and grab the plated barrel of the revolver.

They fought like madmen. El Halcon had out a knife toward the last. He slashed Delaney's neck and shoulders. Their breath was in each other's faces. Delaney brought a knee up into the Mexican's groin. His groping fingers closed on an oblong boulder. He struck with frenzied strength. El Halcon's voice trailed off abruptly in the midst of a hissing Spanish oath. His skull was battered in.

Delaney sprawled out face down and lay there panting. He felt weak and shaken. Presently, he got up and stared about him with glittering yellow eyes. He slipped his gun back into its holster. The Mexican's belt yielded a thousand dollars Mex, more or less, which went to join that which was again in his own money belt. As an afterthought, Delaney took the jewel encrusted crucifix from about the dead man's neck. He held it up between him and the rising sun, studying its gleaming facets, his expression enigmatic.

Smirking, he dropped it in a pocket of his vest. His wounds were superficial. There was one on his shoulder that needed sewing together. He fashioned a crude bandage for it.

When El Halcon's companion came riding back down to the springs, El Halcon appeared to be sitting with his back leaning comfortably against the bole of an ancient cottonwood. Delaney, too, was seated; his body partially hidden by a remnant of adobe wall. He waited until the one called Diego had come close enough to be staring with sudden alarm at the bloodstains on the dead man's clothing. Then he shot three times in rapid succession.

Plump-faced Diego slumped from his saddle. The racer spun around to race back trail in a sudden burst of speed; only to circle back to where the other thorobred was staked out in the old corral. Delaney got on his roan and rounded up the two of them. He didn't take time to count the money in the saddlebags. There were nearly twenty pounds of it. He placed the two canvas sacks in his own saddle pockets. Then he took the saddles and bridles off the racers.

"I hate like hell to leave you," he muttered. "Takin' you along, though, would be a dead give away."

He took one of El Halcon's water bags, refilled his own, and with them swishing musically from either side the pommel, rode away. The sun seemed to have leaped up into the stagnant sky. Already it beat down fiercely. He rode south from the cottonwoods for a short ways, then reined left in a wide circle.

This course brought him eventually along a route paralleling the trail that ran north from the springs. The going became rougher and rougher. The trail climbed steadily.

A few miles farther and he would have climbed to Guaymas pass at the head of it. There at the summit, the trail forked. From there, a man might turn any which way. With water for a dry camp there were within a range of a few miles a number of secluded pockets where one could safely rest as well as find feed for his mount.

Delaney patted the roan's mane encouragingly. "It ain't much farther. We'll be in the shade 'fore that sun gets up high enough to bake us on these rocks."

His wounds had nearly quit bleeding. Looking back over the basin, he wondered what had become of the riders he felt certain had been dogging his trail the night before. Not that he cared greatly any longer. Another mile and he would be through the pass. After that, even if he did meet some wandering rider, there would be no way to link him with what had happened at the springs.

Even a San Carlos apache would be un-

able to follow the trail of the roan across the rocks. Hereafter, he would travel mostly at night. In a week or so he would be in a country where they had never heard of Los Hermanos. Where one might take things easy and enjoy himself for a while. Delaney's mind lingered on the thought. Wine, women, and song! Particularly, wine and women.

He came to the summit of the trail. Cane cactus and candlewood thrust up thin prickly arms above the tumbled rocks. Ahead, the Guaymas dropped away into the pastel reaches of the desert. The roan pricked up its ears.

Delaney's hand dropped to his gun. "Easy, boy," he said, and pulled up, thin eyes staring suspiciously ahead.

Some tiny sound caught his ear. He glanced up at the jumbled rocks to the left of him. Sunlight played on the grey metal of a gun barrel. He saw Gombel looking down at him from over the top of a ragged square of lava. The marshal's full face seemed redder than usual. It was strangely complacent.

"We aim to have a little talk with you, Delaney," he said. "You didn't give us time in Los Hermanos, last night."

Delaney glanced on down the summit and saw the crown of another hat poking up behind a cactus clump. He looked to the right of the trail and found a third man standing boldly in sight some little ways behind him.

He knew then who it was had been following him the night before. Knew that the marshal had banked on his going by way of Guaymas Springs, and had cut straight across the basin to the pass.

"You didn't say nothin' about wantin' to talk with me, that I recollect," said Delaney.

He was thinking that the marshal must have an airtight case against him at last. He wondered if someone could have seen him leaving the livery stable. Whatever the line-up against him, the money in his saddle bags would probably cinch it on him. Three murders! They'd been wanting to put a rope around his neck for quite a spell.

Delaney glanced from the corner of his eye at the trail ahead. There was a deep gully to the left of it. The gully ran along the summit for some distance. There was a chance, that if a man got into it and bent low over his horse's withers, he would be pretty well hidden. It was as good a bet as any.

"An' I don't want to talk with you, nohow," he said.

He drove his spurs into the roan's flanks, jerking at the same time on his left rein. His gun flashed out. He shot wildly at Gombel and the man behind the cactus, saw them duck down even as they shot in turn. The roan reached the gully in two mighty leaps, slid down the crumbling side of it on its haunches. Delaney pressed down over the pommel. The gully was shallower than he had thought it would be.

He glanced back over his shoulder at the marshal. Gombel was squinting along the sights of a carbine. Delaney felt two burning weights tear through his body. His limbs were suddenly paralyzed. He fell from the saddle. He was aware of a cloud of dust billowing up about him. After a while it began settling. Dimly through it he saw Gombel and one of the deputies staring down at him.

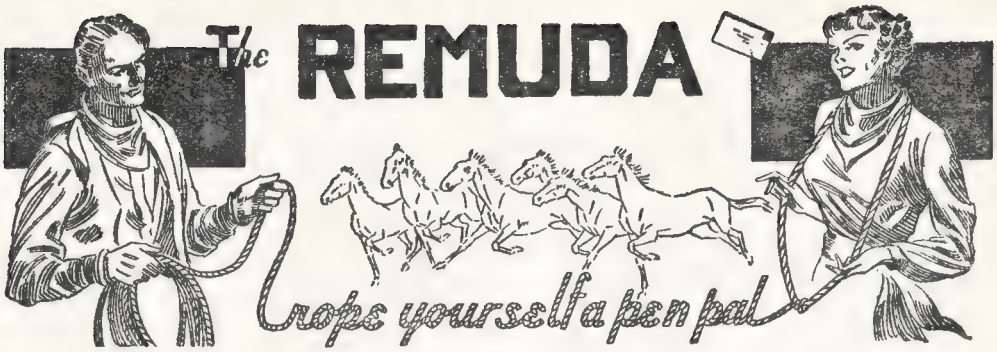
"We was aimin' to ask you where you'd got that Mex gold you was flashin' back there in the restaurant," Gombel was saying.

Delaney's lips moved in a curse. No sound came from them. His mind struggled with what Gombel was saying. It came to him that the marshal had followed him to find out where he had gotten the twenty-peso piece. He realized that Gombel had not even known about the murder of the hostler before leaving Los Hermanos. He vaguely made out the third member of the posse coming up with the canvas sacks that had been in his saddle bags.

"Well, here it is," the deputy said. "Most of what they got when they stuck up the Calexico Border Exchange."

"I figured it was him done it," said Gombel, "the minute he begin gettin' flustered over gettin' his change there at the cafe."

Delaney grimaced comprehendingly. He had been wrong when he had thought no one on this side the border would be on the lookout for Mexican gold. El Halcon had held up an exchange on this side of the line! Had probably stolen the racers, had never been in the rebel army at all. Delaney glowered fiercely up at the sun. The cards had been stacked against him from the beginning. Still, it had been a right interesting game while it lasted. He felt strangely content. Wondered why the cloud of dust was growing darker.



The REMUDA is open to all readers of WESTERN ACTION NOVELS. We encourage correspondence. Here, you will make new friends; perhaps thousands of miles away or right in your own home town. Send your letter in to us and we will print it in these pages. If you don't want your name and address to appear, sign your nickname and send address confidential to us and we will forward all answers to you. Let's hear what you think of this magazine. Address, Room 203, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C. The Old Wrangler.

MUSICIANS WANTED

Dear Wrangler:

Please publish this letter and help me secure some pretty pen pals. I am directing the band and teaching music in a high school now. I attended college in Oklahoma; during my summer vacations I traveled with a dance band and have been in twenty-eight states. I have had many interesting experiences. My age is twenty-seven and I am nearly six feet tall and am dark complexioned with brown hair and blue eyes.

Here in Western Nebraska, it is rather lonesome at times, so I sure would like to have some Pen Pals especialy musicians.

Sincerely,
LEON ARENDS

Box 272
Dalton, Nebraska

INTERESTED IN ENGLISH TYPE FOOTBALL

Dear Wrangler:

Here's hoping you will welcome to the Remuda an old reader of your mag. I should like to hear from readers of both sexes and I promise to answer all letters by return from wherever they come from. I am five feet seven, weigh 175 pounds with no superfluous flesh on me. I am interested in all sports especially cycling which I have many medals to show for and also football (the English type), so if anyone in any part of the world wants to hear how the Old Country is getting on I shall be very glad to answer. I promise snaps of myself to the first twelve letters I receive. So Cheerio, till I receive something.

IVOR (KLUE) EDGAR

P. S. I am age 20.
133 Pye Green Rd., Nr. Cannoch,
Staffordshire, England

HE'S BEEN PLACES

Dear Wrangler:

Am terribly lonely at times and would appreciate if you would round me up a few pen pals. Will answer all letters and exchange photos. Am an ex-cowboy, five feet six, brown hair, grey eyes, weigh 149 pounds. Have been in the army, in the Philippine Islands, at Manila, on the Island of Cuzon, and can tell lots of interesting stories. I have also been to China, Japan, Hawaii, and Panama, and California. Now, I would like to hear from foreign Pen Pals. Everyone is welcome and will answer all letters. I almost forgot to mention that I am 30 years of age.

WALTER NEIMAN

Rockford Camp 1
Rockford, Ill.

HE KNOWS HIS WEST

Dear Wrangler:

I'm wild and woolly and full of fleas, and hard to curry below the knees. But don't be afraid, folks. I'm only an ordinary cow nurse from out Montana way looking for pen pals. I have just moved into the city after spending most of my life on the ranch, consequently I would appreciate and answer any letters written to me. I would like to hear from people from the east or southeast parts of the U. S. and also from foreign countries. I am 18 years old, have blue eyes and brown hair, am six feet tall and weigh around 160 pounds.

"Western Action Novels" is the only Western mgazine I have read that makes me think of the west as it really was, and still is in places.

Expectantly,
LESTER KIPP

15-5 St. N. W.
Great Falls, Mont.

HORSES! HORSES! MORE HORSES!

Dear Wrangler:

Well here comes a soldier from the Hawaiian Islands in quest of Pen Pals. I have been a constant reader of your Mag. for a long time and believe me I like it. I was born and raised in the state of Texas and have always been a lover of fine horses. So I am in quest of some fine young people to write to on that subject. I will also tell those who wish to know all I can about the Paradise of the Pacific.

I am twenty years of age, five feet eleven inches tall, weigh one hundred and seventy-three pounds. I have blue eyes and brown hair. My hobbies are swimming and horse-back riding. Well I guess that is about all so I will close waiting for a boatload of mail from all over the states and elsewhere.

Adios Wrangler,
KENNETH PERDUE

Bat. "C" 55th C. A. C.
Fort Kamehameha
Honolulu, Hawaii

HE HAS SOUVENIRS TO OFFER

Dear Wrangler:

I've been reading "Western Action Novels" for quite a while and I think they're swell.

How about getting me some pen pals.

I am 20 years old, 5 ft. 11 inches tall and weigh 165 pounds. My favorite sports are football, baseball, swimming and horse back riding.

I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.

I promise to send the first ten souvenirs.

B. H. JOHNSON

Btry. A, 2nd F. A.
Fort Clayton, Canal Zone.

IN UNCLE SAM'S NAVY

Dear Wrangler:

I read your magazine and enjoy your stories very much and would enjoy having a few pen pals via the Remuda route.

I am a sailor in our Uncle Sam's Navy now stationed at Bremerton, Washington. I have been several trips to all parts of Europe and also the South Sea Island. Can speak three different languages also write them, so give a guy a break and get me some pen pals from all over the world.

I am 20 summers young. Have blue eyes, blond hair, 5 ft. 8 in. tall and weigh 157.

I sincerely hope this letter finds a place in your magazine so a million readers can see it.

I remain sincerely yours,
R. E. RINGSBY

U. S. Naval Hospital
Bremerton, Washington

LIKES ALL SPORTS

Dear Wrangler:

I enjoy your magazine and like it very much. I would appreciate it very much if you would publish my letter.

I'll be sixteen next month, have blond hair, blue eyes and considered good looking.

I would like to correspond with pen pals from everywhere and promise to answer all letters.

I love dancing, swimming, baseball, football, tennis, skating. I love to write, so come on and get your pens in answer to my call for pen pals.

I would like pen pals from either sex from 16 to 20 years but anyone is welcome to write.

I will also exchange pictures with anyone that cares to write to me.

Hoping to get many letters.

I remain yours,
JEAN PALEY

5907 N. Bernard St.
Chicago, Ill.

NO ONE IS TOO YOUNG OR TOO OLD

Dear Wrangler:

Maybe I'm too young to join the Remuda but I hope not because I am the only one in our family and I get quite lonesome for someone to talk to or correspond with so rope me a few pen pals please.

My favorite sport is horseback riding and my hobbies are skating, drawing pictures and writing letters so I don't think you can swamp me with letters.

I am 5 ft. 2 in. tall with light brown hair and brown eyes, 13 years of age and can ride a horse with the best of them, or most of them.

I read your Double Action Magazines continually and find real enjoyment out of the yarns that are in them, I greatly enjoyed reading the "Bucaroo of Blue Wells," and the "Feud of Five Corners."

I am hoping that I get letters from boys, mostly from the west in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, letters from other places will be welcomed.

Don't forget that I am a lonely cow girl of 13, so pen pals fill my mail box full.

JEAN SPENCER

P. S. Snapshots will be exchanged if some are sent and send plenty.

Box 213
Sundance, Wyoming

AN EXCLUSIVE DRAWING IS YOURS

Dear Wrangler:

I'm a very lonely girl living way down here in Dixie—Georgia, to be exact, and would like some pen pals from everywhere, especially real cowpunchers from the wild and woolly west.

I'm 18 years of age with gray eyes and curly hair. Also I'm five feet three inches tall.

I get very lonesome and am "just dying" to hear from other places.

My favorite pastimes are reading, going to the movies, writing letters and drawing. To the first three that write I promise a drawing. You can be sure it will be exclusive as I make up all my ideas.

So come on, all you boys and girls and write to me—I'll be waiting.

MISS CHRISTINE GARDNER

Box 302
Waycross, Georgia

LIVES ON A RANCH

Dear Wrangler:

After reading "The Remuda," in so many of your swell magazines meaning "Western Action Novels" of course, I couldn't resist the appeal to you.

Is there some one some where who would enjoy an industrious pen pal. Writing and receiving letters is my most interesting hobby, tho I do have others.

I am a widow of 28 years. Have brown hair, hazel eyes and fair complexion. Am tall, slender and somewhat of a tom-boy tho I'm supposed to be grown up.

I'd like to hear from every one old and young, male or female, who will write. Will answer letters as promptly as possible. I work, of course and live on a ranch in the heart of the rockies.

Have been over quite a lot of this swell place we live in known as the U. S. A. Would like to go to Canada, Mexico and Alaska. Won't some one tell me about them?

May the good clean reading of Western Action Novels continue for ages to come and thanks a lot Wrangler and W. A. N. for the pen pals I hope to find thru your help.

A pleased reader,
"JACKIE" HOLLAND

Box 6
Tabernash, Colorado

WHO ARE HER NEIGHBORS

Dear Wrangler:

Hello! May I come in and join the jolly crowd of pen pals? I am a girl of nineteen with brown hair and blue eyes and fair complexion. I am 5 foot four inches tall and weigh about 125 pounds

I am interested in practically everything and love to make friends. I'd like to hear from boys and girls that don't live so far away. So come on boys and girls, in Indiana and neighboring states, won't you please write to some one who is simply craving for your friendship? I promise to answer every letter no matter where it is from. How about it, let's give the mailman a big job..

Sincerely
MISS MAGDALEN A. WINIGER

809 E Columbia St.
Evansville, Ind.

WANTS HIS MAILBOX FILLED

Dear Wrangler:

Sure hope you don't mind my busting into the "Remuda" but it just couldn't be helped after hearing what everybody else has to say about the Western Action Novels. I just have to voice my opinion. After reading Western Action Novels I'll say no other Western Magazine I've ever read can compare with the likes of it.

I sure would love to try my hand at securing pen pals. I am twenty years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, like all outdoor sports, especially football and baseball, I also enjoy parties.

I will do my best to answer all letters I receive, so come on girls and boys, give me a break and fill my mail box.

Yours truly,
HAROLD NICKELSON

46 Michigan Avenue
Mt. Clemens, Michigan

LIKES TO WORK WITH HORSES

Dear Wrangler:

Would you do me a big favor and print this plea for Pen Pals in "The Remuda"?

I am a young Texan, 28 years old, 5 ft. 8 ins. tall, dark brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion.

Letters from everyone will be welcome, and will gladly exchange photos with those who wish.

I like all kinds of sports, especially riding and working with horses.

As for your magazine, I think it is the best on the newsstand.

Your pal,
LEWIS W. BASS.

P. O. Box 303,
Schulenburg, Texas.

BEAUTIFUL BLUE HAWAII

Dear Wrangler:

I'm a constant reader of your Western Magazine, and enjoy your double action stories. I would like to join your pen pals club.

I am a girl 17 years old. 5 ft. 3 in. tall, weight 118. Blonde hair and blue eyes.

I would like to hear from pen pals from all over the world especially Hawaii.

My hobbies are dancing, reading, and listening to the radio.

I live in a small town where there isn't much to do, so have lots of time to answer all who write. Will gladly exchange photos.

Sincerely,
PHYLLIS HATFIELD.

825 Penn St.,
Huntingdon, Penna.

A HIGH SCHOOL BOY

Dear Wrangler:

I reckon there's nothing better than "Western Action Novels." I would like to get in touch with Pen Pals from all over the United States. I am a boy of 16 years, 5 ft. 8 in. tall, with dark brown hair and eyes. I lived in Maryland for 13 years and I am now living in Philadelphia, but it's nothing like the country. I came to Philadelphia trying to get a better education. I am in second year high at Germantown High School and I am getting along swell. I wish both boys and girls around my age would kindly write to me. My hobbies are dancing, horseback riding, and most of all aviation. I will exchange personal snapshots with anyone writing to me. Come on, boys and girls, and get acquainted. *Your pal,*
EDWARD SCOTT.

5045 Pulaski Ave.,
Philadelphia, Pa.

CONSIDERED GOOD LOOKING

Dear Wrangler:

How are chances for a young soldier in the U. S. army joining your Pen Pal club? I am 19 years of age. 6 ft. tall, and weigh 143 lbs. I would like to hear from cowgirls from the west most of all, and from any other girls in the United States or foreign countries. I am interested in anything sensible. I will answer all letters sent to me and will exchange snapshots. I am considered good looking and have blue eyes and light brownish wavy hair. Come on, girls, you are all invited to write.

Sincerely yours,
PVT. RED.

Care The Wrangler.

COME ON, BEAUTIFUL GIRLS!

Dear Wrangler:

If that excellent magazine of yours still has the Pen Pal department, there's a curious fellow from Aussie Land who loves anything from the wide open spaces to the noisy city, from the blue of the sky to the green of the sea, just wondering if there are any young female Yankees with enough energy to send a letter across a few thousand miles of water to a young chap 19 years old, 5 ft. 10 ins. high, and weighs 12 stone (7 lbs.).

They say over here there are lots of beautiful girls in America. Well, let's hear from some.

Yours,
MR. H. GLISSOLD.

Elderslie, Camden,
New South Wales, Australia.

PREFERS W. A. N. TO HISTORY

Dear Wrangler:

As I am in sunny South Africa I would like to have Pen Pals all over the globe.

I am a student at the Monument High School, but seeing that I don't overburden my young head, I have plenty of time to correspond with all who care to write.

I am 5 ft. 6 ins. tall, weigh 135 lbs., hazel eyes, fair hair and fair complexion. Find more pleasure in helping with the sheep and outdoor work than helping in the house.

I can assure you that I find the magazine much more interesting than history.

Thanking you for all my Pen Pals.

MISS CAROL. MESNARD.

13 Croft St., Roodepoort,
Transvaal, South Africa.

With hundreds of letters coming in every week, it is impossible to print them all. Below are names, ages, and descriptions of some Pen Pals, who will be eager to hear from you.

Margary McMichael, (collects view cards) Elkton, Ore.
James K. Harsh, (23, plays the guitar) Box 29, Fredonia, Pa.
James Cunningham, (28, will exchange snaps) Winlaton, via Tresco, Victoria, Australia.
Anna Paramski, (21, brown eyes) Five Points Filling Sta., Waukegan, Ill.
Sophie Sutinis, (25, blue eyes) Five Points Filling Sta., Waukegan, Ill.
Bill Edes, (20, wants New York pal) 89 Milbank St., Northam, Southampton, Eng.
Austin Cragg, (20, likes dancing) 1215 Bergen St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Billie Gibron, (lonesome bachelor) R. 2 Middleburg, Ind.
Helen Shwanek, (18, lives on a farm) R. D. 2, Trenton, N. J.
Douglas Threadgould, (19, keen on all sports) Crossing House, Stratton, Burton-on-Trent, England.
Albert Hayman, (22, likes hiking) 2509 Douglas St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Leroy Vern Reynolds, (15, lonesome cowboy) Grand Junction, Colo.
Ethel Mitchell, (17, olive complexion) Rte. 2, Rule, Texas.
Woodrow Wilson Kramer, (would like to hear from fellow Kansans) Box 383, Marquette, Kansas.
Lee Watkins, (18, hill billy) Rte. 1, Belmont, Ky.
Carl Heller, ("Breezy") 2012A West Cherry St., Milwaukee, Wisc.
Miss D. Moore, (everyone welcome) "Tai Ping," North Rd., Three Bridges, Sussex, England.
Leo T. Perkins, (20, "in the heart of the Ozarks") Lincoln, Ark.
Ginger Koellhoffer, (18, lonely blue-eyed blond) 476 So. 10th St., Newark, N. J.
Doris Gregory, (20, both sexes wanted) Gen. Del, E. Peoria, Ill.
Bud Winslow, (13, freckle face) Rte. 1, Olympia, Wash.
Frank R. Earl, (20, trifle over six feet tall) 335 Washington Ave., Albany, N. Y.
Beryl Ingram, (14, green eyes) Hill Crest, Imprey Park, Droitwick, Eng.
Kenneth Chang, (20, a seaman) 7770 North School St., Honolulu, Hawaii.
Allen Garrett, (fond of the west) R. 4, Commerce, Ga.
Elio Paganelli, (17, interested in track running) 1301 So. 50th St., Cicero, Ill.
Bob Martiss, (17, baseball fans wanted) 2812 W. Madison St., Chicago, Ill.
Shirley Priestman, (13, stamp collector) Cottage 2, Kings Park, L. I., N. Y.
Eileen Sander, (15, poet) Rte. 1, Box 54, Centuria, Wisc.
Wally Norris, (22, interested in stamps) 109 Radcliffe Rd., Northam, Southampton, England.
Margaret Collins, (13, collects movie star pictures) Club House, Kings Park, Long Island, N. Y.
Ralph L. Invis, (23, will exchange snaps) Box 145, Drumbo, Ontario, Canada.
Robert Prelesnick, (18, has travelled a lot) B. R. 59C, Palisade, Colo.
Adeline Smith, (14, prefers outdoor sports) Rte. 2, Box 324, Franklin Grove, Ill.
Maxine Kelley, (14, will exchange photos) Franklin Grove, Ill.
Daniel K. Canner, (30, lives on a farm) R. 1, Box 24, Woodbine, Virginia.
Ed. Verisalle, (27, just returned from years at sea) 1327 S. 21st St., Milwaukee, Wisc.
Earl Heller, (has big feet) 305 First St., Watertown, Wisc.
Mary E. Coates, (15, quite a tomboy) Rison, Charles Co., Maryland.
Leslie P. Northward, (19, fond of swimming) 2 Hendham Rd., Wandoworth Common, London, S. W. 17, Eng.
Shelton Graddos Wright, (20, farm boy) Tuckerman, Ark.
Harold Nellis, (19, interested in boxing) 27 N. Division St., St. Johnsville, New York.
Edward Baker, (17, Westerners wanted) 40 Northfield St., Greenwich, Conn.

CURIOS FOR SALE

Large U. S. cent over 100 years old	20c
U. S. large copper cent	15c
U. S. large copper 2c coin	15c
U. S. large copper hard time token	20c
U. S. 1863 Civil War token	15c
U. S. silver half dime	20c
U. S. nickel three-cent piece	15c
U. S. silver three-cent piece	30c
U. S. flying eagle cent	15c
U. S. thick white Indian head cent	10c
U. S. copper large half cent over 100 years old	50c
U. S. Columbian half dollars	75c
U. S. half dollar over 100 years old	$1.00
U. S. fine silver dollar 1798, rare	5.00
U. S. gold dollar, old, fine	2.35
10 different dates of Indian head cents	25c
U. S. Colonial bill 1797, fine, rare	1.00
Confederate $10.00 bill, artillery	10c
Virginia $1.00 treasury note, pretty	10c
Georgia $5.00 bill, 1862, fine	10c
Confederate bill 50c; Jackson	10c
Calitornia gold quarter, queer	25c
California gold half, queer	50c
10 different queer foreign bills	10c
10 different foreign coins	15c
5 different foreign nickel coins	10c
Roman bronze B.C. coin, Roman soldiers	25c
Foreign old nice silver dollar	95c
Foreign coin over 100 years old	10c
Foreign coin, fine, dated before 1800	15c
Foreign coin, fine, dated before 1700	25c
Foreign coin, dated before 1600	50c
$2.00 catalogue value of different fine foreign stamps	25c
100 different fine foreign stamps	10c
5 different fine foreign covers	15c
25 different nice U. S. stamps	10c
U. S. first flight cover, fine	15c
U. S. first day cover	15c
U. S. fine cachet cover	10c
100 mixed foreign stamps	6c
1000 mixed foreign stamps	35c
1000 different foreign stamps, fine collection	1.25
Ohio pretty 5c fractional currency bill, 1862.	10c
500 different fine foreign stamps	75c
$10.00 catalogue value fine different foreign stamps	1.00
5 different camera photos of pretty French bathing beauties	25c
Ivory telescope watch charm, Lord's prayer in it	15c
Ivory telescope watch charm, ten commandments in it	15c
Ivory telescope watch charm, pretty French girl in it	15c
Miniature queer Aztec pottery	10c
Tesuque (used) genuine Indian pipebowl	75c
Catawba (used) genuine Indian pipebowl	25c
Pair Sioux beaded buckskin moccasins	1.50
Pretty long genuine Mexican handmade quilt	1.00
Indian, pretty, solid beaded watch fob	30c
Solid, beaded, pretty, leather belt, fine buckle	3.00
Solid beaded, pretty hat band, wide	1.50
Woven, pretty designed horse hair belt	2.85
Miniature, pretty, pistol shoots a real shell, beauty	1.00
New hunting knife, genuine deer foot handle	1.25
New hunting knife, pretty goldstone handle, in sheath	1.25
New belt spots and sets on natural hide with hair on	1.50

Minerals, Weapons, Old West Photos, Beadwork, Indian Relics, Stamps, Coins, Bills, Books, Curios.

Catalogue, 5 Cents

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THE TRADING POST

Here is where the readers of WESTERN ACTION NOVELS can exchange something they have, but do not want, for something that someone else may have and that you may want. This is a free service, but your announcement must not exceed 28 words. It must be understood that WESTERN ACTION NOVELS is not responsible for losses sustained. Print your announcement clearly. Nothing but bona fide "swaps" will be inserted. No sales. Enclose clipping of this announcement with your "swap."

Want Short HiSpeed Woodsman, 16 pump or double, Remington 22 Fieldmaster rifle, Weaver rifle scope. A. Welker, 406 No. Harvey, Oak Park, Ill.

Have guns, revolvers, old clock, old coins, etc. Want Indian relics, violins, etc. Send your list and get mine. E. B. Campbell, R. No. 1, Box 88, Tullahoma, Tenn.

Have 5 volumes Library of Freemasonry, illustrated, leather bound. Also 50 fiction books and 200 magazines: Detective, Western Adventures, etc. Want low speed, 6-volt generator or offers. Max Belz, Waldoboro, Me.

Will swap Stamps, stamp for stamp, quality for quality. Send 100 with return 3c. postage, and I will send like amount. L. C. Fuller, Pinehurst, North Carolina.

Swap: Saxophone and case, cap shotgun, sword cane, camp stove, 1659 book, mounted deer heads. Want: Firearms, portable typewriters, old stamps on envelopes, or what? Stjohn, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Have forty late western magazines, five pairs of riding breeches, two khaki tropical uniforms, light small car in excellent running condition. Would like small trailer. Jean G. Malleux, Box 88, Watertown, Mass.

Have electric engineering course, Eastman kodak 2¾ by 3¼, German bayonets, printing press, revolver, electric razor, rubber boat inflated, motor, Remington & Oliver typewriters. Want radio or. J. Steel, Box 107, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Diamond rings, 75 pounds solder, 500 articles for scrap gold, pistols, saxophone, bird stones, broken watches, yellow cases, coins, sterling silver eggs, honey. Foeller, 3117 Brigham, Toledo, Ohio.

100 magazines, 1 Argosy printed July, 1905, 31 years old. Want Carl Zeiss & Hensoldt 8 power grey army field glasses and new condition Winchester or Remington 5-shot, 22-bolt action clip magazine or repeater action. S. M. Smith, Luretha, Ky.

What do you want for correspondence courses, scouting, sports and athletic goods, stamp albums, stamps, magazines, books, novelties, etc. R. Yates, Laurel Hill, Coleraine, County Derry, Ireland.

Will exchange picture cards, 3½"x2½", views of Australian towns and scenery for cards of other countries. Cards must be only 3½"x2½" in size. A. M. Prior, New Moonta, Old Australia.

Have a 45-70 rifle, good shape. Will trade for stamps or stamp collection. R. E. Brittain, R. D. No. 1, Mogadore, Ohio.

Have approximately 200 formulas. Worth $50. Trade lot for typewriter, or correspondence courses, or Encyclopedia Britannica, or archery equipment, or taxidermy course. C. Edmonds, Kaimata, Taranaki, N. Z.

Wanted: Radio or train equipment, electric. I have coins, stamps, magazines, books, flashlights, pens, small size boxing gloves, camera, and gun. Peter Messer, 2011 D St., Bellingham, Washington.

Have engravings dated 1789, N. W. taxidermy course, U. S. school banjo course, oil paintings, plants, vases, electric clock, others. Want old guns, swords, Indian pottery, coins, bronze and marble statuary, plants. Stanley Pytel, 5025 Ogden Ave., Cicero, Ill.

Trade these three valuable money-making formulas, shaving cream, tooth paste, chewing gum, for 100-shot air pistol, or 1,000 different stamps, or course on ju-jitsu. G. Edmonds, Kaimata, Taranaki N. Z.

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This is a radio in itself as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 25 miles of a station (or up to 100 miles under good conditions). All you need is an aerial & ear phone. Completely assembled and wired with supersensitive crystal, stand, base, crystal cup, arm with cats whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. 25c

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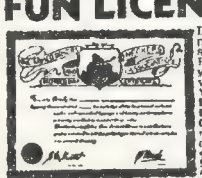

Large size, nicely printed with seal, suitable for framing. Hand one of these to your friend and he will never forget you! Your choice: Liar's License; Bootlegger's Diploma; Marriage Certificate (it looks real); Liar's & grafter's Certificate; Moonsiper's Certificate; Spanish Athletes (Bull Throwers) Certificate; Gold Diggers & Grafters Certificate; One Armed Drivers & Neckers Certificate; Kibitzers Certificate. Only 10c each. 3 for 25c.

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Very striking, quaint and uncommon. Oxidized gunmetal finish; skull and crossbones design; two brilliant flashing imitation rubies or emeralds sparkle out of the eyes. Said to bring good luck to the wearer. Only 25c.

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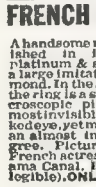

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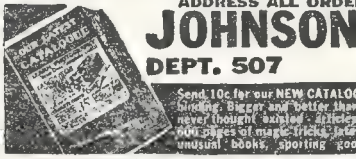

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WHEN TROUBLED *with* DELAY

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In Europe women are not distressed about abnormal, unnatural periodic delay. . . They use Dr. Haller's famous Prescriptions, aimed to end most discouraging, over-due, delayed cases, within three days. No longer need modern women be satisfied with old-fashioned pills or gelatin capsules that act like a laxative, when what women really want is quick relief from unnatural delay.

FREE TRIAL at our expense, sent in plain wrapper, also a valuable periodic calendar in celluloid case.

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"It sure is wonderful . . ." A. K., Wis. "I believe it is the only successful treatment on the market." P. C., Calif. "I have used your Prescription 5000 and it worked like a charm. It didn't work until the ampules were used. I didn't think they would work because I tried everything else, but Prescription 5000 sure is wonderful. I was delayed 2½ months." T. M., Calif.

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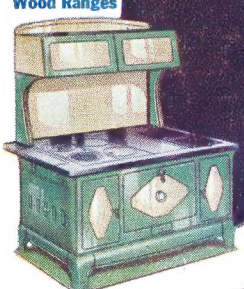

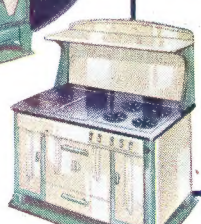

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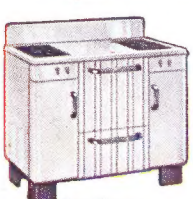

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